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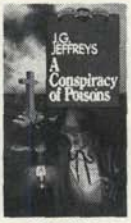

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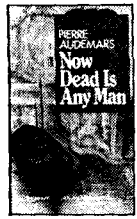

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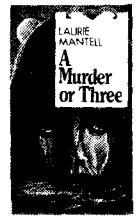

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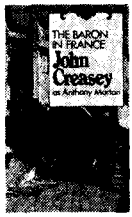

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JULIAN SYMONS

"You know you don't want children," Evelyn said. "Admit it."

Courtney found that difficult. "It isn't exactly that I don't want them—it's what they cost. I've worked it out, and the annual expense when you take everything into account—"

"It doesn't matter. I just want us to be happy, Court, that's all."

The estimable Julian Symons has somehow found time to write this clever and delicious new story, completely revise and update his scholarly critique of crime fiction, Bloody Murder, *published this summer by Viking, and finish a delightful new novel,* A Criminal Comedy, *due from Viking in January . . .*

THE BIRTHMARK

by JULIAN SYMONS

It is often said that doctors know of several undetectable poisons which they never mention in the presence of patients, but in truth these reports are much exaggerated, for they generally refer to beneficial medicines that may have a deadly effect if wrongly used. Insulin injections, for instance, are vital for diabetics but can cause death through hypoglycemia if injected into a perfectly healthy person. The truly undetectable poisons are discovered by research chemists, and the secrets of them remain buried in their laboratories. Or at least, that is where they should remain.

The use of such a poison was the undoing of Courtney Vance. After the trial and sentence, he freely admitted his guilt, complaining to prisoners and warders alike about his bad luck. "It was perfect, really perfect," he would say. "Nothing could possibly go wrong." Then he would launch into a lengthy account of the affair and just

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what did, unbelievably, go wrong. Courtney got a life sentence, which with remission generally means nine years in Britain, but he served only three of them. Another prisoner, who had slaughtered his wife and three children with an axe and suffered agonies of remorse ever since, was enraged by the endless repetition of the tale and Courtney's callousness about the crime. He stabbed Courtney fatally with a shiv made in the prison craft shop where they worked side by side. The axe murderer was sent to Broadmoor, where he in turn bored his doctors with an endless recital of grief about his lost family.

Courtney Vance was in his late thirties at the time of the murder, a senior sales representative for DPN Medical Supplies. The term "salesman" was deprecated, but he was in fact a salesman and a very good one. His manner with the doctors and wholesale chemists on whom he called was confident but deferential, impressive both through his grasp of medical detail and his refusal to oversell any product. "This is something that our wise men think may be helpful in certain arthritic cases," he would say. "But they do acknowledge it has limitations and, frankly, my own feeling is that there *may* be side effects in certain conditions, although of course I'm not a doctor."

His smile conveyed, what was already known to many of his customers, that he might have been—could have been—a doctor if mysterious family troubles had not prevented him from taking the final examinations. In fact, he had failed his prelims twice, and then given up. Or rather his father, an assistant bank manager, had been told that it would be a waste of money for him to continue.

"They say you've got no application. 'Not too bright and lacks application'—that was the story at school, and it's the same now. I don't know what you're fitted for, Bill, except to sweep the streets."

Courtney said truthfully that it had been his father who wanted him to be a doctor, and he hoped it would not come to sweeping the streets. What did he feel inclined for? Some kind of journalism, perhaps—certainly something that wasn't tied down to regular hours in an office or a doctor's surgery. He had half a dozen jobs in as many years after giving up medicine, and left or failed at all of them before being taken on for a trial period by DPN. There he was a success from the start, and at the time of the murder had been with them for ten years. He worked from home, which was an outer suburb of London called Warners Green, although he was required to spend four weeks each year at the laboratories outside Northampton, where new products were tested, and another four at conferences

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where selling points were emphasized. He much enjoyed these occasions, when he impressed everybody by his authoritative manner, which was combined always with deference to superiors.

It was shortly after he got the DPN job that he married Evelyn Bridges, whom he had known at school. Her father was understood to be something influential in the City. Certainly he always wore a bowler hat when he drove up every day from Warners Green to town in his Mercedes—except on days when the Mercedes was to be seen outside the local golf club. His wife drove a small Lancia. "They're a two-car family," Mr. Vance, Senior said when his son told him he had been accepted by Evelyn. "It's a good marriage, son." His wife piped her eye and said it seemed like fate that they should have met again. Evelyn, like Courtney (who had by now discarded his first name of William, always detestably abbreviated to Bill), was an only child.

In fact, fate had received some assistance from Courtney. After that first chance renewal of acquaintance at a local Conservative Club dance, he had sensed that Evelyn was his for the taking, and had courted her assiduously. He was in his late twenties and had been thinking that it was time for marriage. This was even truer of Evelyn, who was a couple of years older, plump, placid, and plain. In a physical sense she was hardly a catch, but there was the Mercedes, the Lancia, that "something in the City" aura of money. It was a church wedding, the reception for a hundred and fifty people was held at the best local hotel, Mr. Bridges paid for a honeymoon in Paris. He waved aside Courtney's thanks. "You're one of the family now, m'boy."

Being one of the family, however, did not bring the benefits Courtney had hoped for, even expected. When Mr. Bridges had a heart attack and died on the golf course a couple of years later, the bowler hat proved to have been, as one might say, a deception. Whatever Mr. Bridges had been in the City, it was something not very important, or not very profitable. He had lived consistently above his income. The house had to be sold; the Mercedes went, of course; the Lancia was replaced by a Mini; the widow settled down in a small flat. For Courtney and Evelyn there was nothing at all.

It was true, as she said, that they had each other, and by now Courtney had received promotion at DPN. They lived in a neat little semi-detached house in a row of almost exactly similar houses, with a pocket-handkerchief garden in front and a bigger patch behind. There were in the first months no children, something which Evelyn

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regretted but which secretly pleased Courtney. He was a careful, cautious man and regarded a child as an expense they really could not afford. This was something Evelyn knew, as she seemed mysteriously to know everything about him. He realized the depth of her understanding when she suggested he should have a vasectomy.

"You know you don't want children," she said. "Admit it."

He found that difficult. "It isn't exactly that I don't want them—it's what they cost. I've worked it out, and the annual expense when you take everything into account—"

"It doesn't matter. I want us to be happy, Court, that's all."

"I should like you just to look at these figures, they show the situation so clearly—"

Evelyn looked at the figures and said yes; he had the vasectomy, and felt distinctly relieved. They had quite a busy social life. The senior Vances and Mrs. Bridges came round to Sunday lunch or supper at regular intervals, and both Courtney and Evelyn were pillars of the local Conservatives. There were socials and bazaars, at homes, tea and supper parties. Evelyn made little scones and cakes and homemade jams, and was an excellent housekeeper, working always within the agreed sum he gave her each month. "She's a wonderful little wife, son," the now retired Mr. Vance, Senior said after a supper party of beef olives, potatoes done in some French manner with cream or butter, and a green salad, all washed down with cheap but flavorsome supermarket wine. Courtney did not dissent, although "little" was by now a misnomer, for Evelyn enjoyed her own cooking and was distinctly big.

It was because of her size, Courtney told himself, that he indulged in occasional peccadilloes. His success as a salesman for DPN products had led to an extension of his territory, so that he often spent a night or two away from home. On these occasions he looked deliberately for one-night stands, and often found them. These peccadilloes—which was the word he always used to himself about them—did not, he felt sure, affect his marriage. Even so, it was disconcerting to find that Evelyn's ability to understand him extended to them.

"Would you say you married me for my money, Court?" she asked one evening. That was ridiculous, he said, he hadn't had a penny from her family. "Correction, I should have said in hope of making useful contacts, perhaps Daddy getting you into some glamorous job, and finally inheriting a nice little packet when he died."

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"If you put it that way—well, not exactly, but some of those thoughts might have been in my mind."

"Still, it hasn't worked out badly, has it?" He kissed her and said it had been marvelous.

"No, marvelous isn't the word, but it's been all right. You're doing well, we have a lot of friends, I'm good at running the house—"

He interrupted her to say truthfully that she was a wonderful manager.

"Only trouble is, you don't like fat women. Don't interrupt, you know it's true. And I'm fat, can't be helped, something to do with metabolism, I've read it all up. You go on doing your duty, but I know it is a duty. Remember when you used to bring me flowers, give me scent? Not any more. And you're working off some of that surplus energy when you're away for the night. No need to worry about it. I just want you to know that I know, and don't mind, that's all."

There was something uncomfortable about being so thoroughly understood, but he didn't deny what she had said. Instead, he asked how she could put up with him. She said, with a sparkle in her eye, "Because you're just about the handsomest man I ever saw, that's why."

At this time Courtney Vance was certainly handsome. In youth he had looked immature and uncertain, but success, confidence, and the passing years had greatly improved his appearance. He looked, he thought himself, like a film star in the days when they dressed well, bathed and shaved often, had hair that was properly brushed and combed—Cary Grant perhaps, with a touch of David Niven. An old-fashioned look? Well, he didn't pretend or wish to be one of your long-haired teenagers in jeans. His thick dark hair was becomingly flecked with grey at the sides, his figure as slim now as it had been when he married, his profile as clear-cut. There was a suggestion of weakness in the wobbly, shapeless mouth, and of self-satisfaction in the way he smoothed his little moustache, but taken all round Courtney Vance was undoubtedly a handsome man, and for many women an attractive one.

A day or two after that conversation, Courtney bought Evelyn flowers, and a week later a bottle of Magical Night, the tangy fragrance of which had enlivened their honeymoon. Evelyn smiled, thanked him, patted his cheek. He was pleased, but also a little resentful. Did one bring home a bottle of sexy perfume to be patted on the cheek like a child? But he enjoyed his job and admired his

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wife even though he did not love her passionately. If he had been asked whether he was a contented man he would have said yes.

Then, a year before the murder, he acquired a mistress.

Thelma was the American-born wife of a local building contractor named George Hartley, a great bull-necked man with a voice which seemed always to be issuing through a megaphone. Courtney had found himself sitting next to her at a Conservative Club dinner and they had got on wonderfully well from the start. Not surprisingly, perhaps, since almost her first words were: "I've seen you at meetings often enough, and you know what I've always thought? One day I'm going to be sitting next to that man and then I'll say it straight out to him."

"Say what?"

"Tell him he's the most attractive man in the room. There, I've said it." Dark eyes flashed at him. "I know Evelyn already, we're on a couple of committees together. She's a honey. But you've got no time for that sort of stuff, I know. Evelyn says you're a busy man."

He told her what he did, implying that it was only a matter of time before he was invited to join the DPN board. "And your husband is—?"

"Over at the next table. The man with the thickest neck in the room. And the thickest skin. He only thinks about one thing." There was a pause before she said, "Money. He's away a lot, too." She turned and faced him directly. She had a high color, strong features, flaring nostrils. The side of her face that had been turned away from him was marred by a birthmark, going from cheekbone to temple, purplish and menacing. A smile touched her lips, then she turned away abruptly and spoke to her neighbor on the other side. What had she been hinting?

He asked Evelyn about her, casually, tactfully, and learned that Hartley had met her at some convention where she was handling public relations for the English end of an American firm. They had been married within a few months, both for the second time.

"Some of the Tory ladies don't like her. Think she married George Hartley for his money, and that might be true—she's years younger than he is. Then she offers to do this and that, and they think she's pushy. If you ask me, they're just jealous. I like her. How old do you suppose she is—thirty?"

"I really hadn't thought."

"She *is* very direct, says what she thinks. How did you get on?"

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"Well enough. She's rather aggressive for my taste."

"You like everything to run smoothly, no rows, I know that." She smiled at him. It was true, but he slightly resented her knowing it, and saying so. Indeed he found himself more and more irritated by the way in which Evelyn seemed always to know what he thought in advance.

It has been said that Courtney Vance was a cautious man. He had no wish to do anything that might affect his marriage, his work, or what he thought of as his social position. All the peccadilloes had taken place well away from home, and although he thought about Thelma Hartley and the look she had given him, it was not until she came in to the local pub where he was having lunch that he did anything about it. It would have been absurd not to eat their sandwiches and drink their beer together. He asked what she was doing there.

"When George is on a trip I can't be bothered to cook for one, often go to a pub. What about you? I thought you were always away."

"Doing a round of local calls. I'm off on a little tour tomorrow—Surrey and Sussex. I'll be away two or three days." She said he was lucky. He thought quickly. On the following day his calls would, or could, take him within a few miles of Warners Green. He asked if she would have dinner with him, naming a hotel near enough for her to drive to it, far enough away to make it unlikely that any Warners Green resident would be there.

She drained her beer and said, "I thought you'd never ask." The birthmark glowed a fiery red. In some curious way he found this flaw on her otherwise perfect skin attractive.

In the hotel on the following night, they did not eat dinner but went straight up to the room he had booked in the traditional name of Smith. Before the act and after it, Thelma talked. She said that she was bored with the bull, which was what she called her husband, bored with Warners Green, bored with the stuffiness and pettiness of local politics. Courtney said he was bored, too, although that was not true.

She walked out naked to the bathroom, showered, and came back. "You've done this kind of thing before."

"Not *this* kind of thing," he said, and meant it. Her passion and eagerness was strange to him. Afterwards she had been dripping with sweat. He didn't ask about her own experiences, afraid of what he might hear. What followed was not exactly a night of bliss, for Courtney was nervous of such raw excitement as she displayed, but

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it was certainly a night of a kind outside his knowledge, one he wanted to repeat. At one moment she said, "What about Evelyn? You going to tell her?"

He was shocked. "Good heavens, no. Certainly not. You surely don't intend—"

"To tell the bull? No, he might fly off the handle, though let me tell you, he's no reason to complain. He's got a string of floozies. I've found letters in his pockets. If I wanted to, I could take George for half the money he's got." Her mouth shut like a trap, her natural color was heightened, the birthmark glowed.

Over the next months, there were a dozen occasions when she stayed at hotels with him. Sometimes Hartley was at home and she had to say no. Courtney then felt deeply frustrated, but he did not seek out other women in her absence. They had been peccadilloes—this was the real thing, a grand passion.

He was slightly embarrassed by the fact that Thelma and Evelyn became very friendly. Twice he came home from trips during which Thelma had spent a night with him to find her in the living room.

"She's really interesting," Evelyn said. "Got quite a different slant on things. Perhaps it's because she's American."

"I shouldn't see too much of her if I were you." He added rather feebly and absurdly that she had a doubtful reputation. He never had a real row with Evelyn—as she had said, he did not care for raised voices—but some acrimonious words passed and he brought her flowers on the following day. She accepted them with a smile and patted his cheek.

One night, at a hotel in Brighton, Thelma told him that she and George Hartley had parted. She laughed at his look of shocked surprise.

"Don't look so amazed, these things happen. No need to look worried, either—your name hasn't been mentioned. I told you I had the goods on George. It's separation by mutual consent, with what you might call a truly handsome settlement. He wants to marry one of the floozies after the divorce, which won't be yet a while. Do you know you've got the finest body of any man I've ever seen? Come here and let me make a spot check."

A little later he said, "You'll be leaving Warners Green."

"Right. I've got my eye on a flat in Kensington."

"That means the end for us."

"I don't see why."

But he knew it did. In Kensington, meeting again her sophisti-

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cated London friends, public relations people, and the like, she would soon forget him. He found the thought of life without her dismaying, and said so. Indeed, he used the word unbearable. She looked at him consideringly.

"We do seem to suit each other, don't we? Much better than most. Be a pity to lose it. But you'll come up to town and see me. And I'll still make little trips out to hotels. I quite enjoy the sordidness."

They didn't have to lose it at all, he said wildly—they could live together.

"What about Evelyn? I couldn't do that to her, break up her life. She's my friend."

"I could talk to her, make her understand. She wouldn't want to stand in my way."

"You're talking rubbish and you know it, Courtney Vance. For me you're a playmate, for Evelyn you're a husband. I don't even know that I like you, I just like what we do." She took his hand and put it on the birthmark. "And you might find that this put you off when you saw it every day." He protested that he hardly noticed it. "Mind you, you're such a pretty playmate that if Evelyn weren't there, I might want to have you for keeps. But she is."

He knew that what she said was true, and went home dejected. Evelyn said, "It's Thelma, isn't it? I shall miss her, too."

"What do you mean?"

"I know about the two of you, of course I do. Oh, not from Thelma, she's said nothing. I knew what was going to happen when you asked those questions after the dinner."

"But didn't you *mind?*"

"Oh, yes, I minded." Her placid moon face, a double chin now distinctly visible, smiled at him. "But it seemed to make you happy in ways I couldn't, so I put up with it. A lot of marriage consists of that, putting up with things."

When Courtney paid his quarterly visit to the laboratories outside Northampton, Thelma was still living in Warners Green. She had moved out of her husband's pretentious neo-Gothic house, but the Kensington flat was still the subject of argument about the lease. Evelyn had suggested that she should move into their spare bedroom, but the idea shocked Courtney, and he rejected it out of hand. So Thelma was staying with a niece of her husband's, but she saw Evelyn almost every day.

On the drive up to Northampton, Courtney felt he was escaping from an awkward and slightly ridiculous situation. He had been

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altogether bowled over by Thelma, but could see no chance of a permanent relationship with her while Evelyn was there, and he quite accepted that Evelyn would always be there. The thought of Evelyn's death, and the possibility that he might cause it, never entered his mind. If he had ever considered such a thing he would have rejected the idea as far too dangerous. It might rather fancifully be said—and afterwards Courtney often and tediously said it—that Heinz Muller turned Courtney Vance into a murderer.

Heinz was an experimental research chemist, who was allowed to be a law unto himself within the firm. He was the chief of something called the Possibilities Ambit Laboratory, called Pal for short, where ideas derived from articles in scientific papers all over the world were tried out. Most of them never got beyond the testing stage, but every so often Heinz came up with a winner, something that could plausibly be called a variant on an existing product or technique, and was marketed successfully. He was unmarried, a Pickwickian little man with merry eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses, a hard drinker and inveterate womanizer. He and Courtney had got along well from the first time they met and had done some peccadilloing together.

On this visit, Courtney went as usual round the various labs, including Pal, talking to the scientists and technicians about what was in the pipeline. In Pal he was greeted warmly. Heinz showed him blends of this or that bubbling in retorts, rats and mice injected with various serums that made their behavior depressed or manic, caused or were meant to cure skin infections and various diseases. At one end of the lab were little jars and bottles of possibilities promising enough for full-scale testing. Most would be found to have undesirable side effects, with luck one or two might be considered for marketing. Heinz talked about them all with enthusiasm, little eyes gleaming. Courtney knew enough to ask informed questions and he was genuinely interested. Heinz picked up two bottles, one large containing a cloudy liquid, the other small with liquid of a clear yellow color. He held up the large bottle, which was labelled Noscan.

"*Very* promising, *quite* revolutionary, amazing. You know pregnant women now all have the maternity scan to see where the baby is positioned, and so on? But it can have bad effects if repeated, so some doctors say. You take Noscan, and you can forget the scan. After a dose of it, an X-ray plate shows everything as clear as if it were an etching."

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"What's the snag?"

Heinz looked comically offended. "I do not say there is any snag. There is perhaps a little local difficulty—a matter of adjustment."

"How do you mean? What's in the other bottle?" The small bottle was labelled simply NX.

Heinz chuckled. "Pure poison." He might have been Mr. Pickwick enjoying a Christmas game at Dingley Dell. "I read an article by a German scientist about the properties of the juice of the beloa shrub which grows in the Brazilian rain forests. The Indians there use it mixed with mud to heal wounds and sores, and they think it is magical, a cure for everything under the sun. I don't tell you how I get it, but this is pure beloa juice. No color, no taste, but pure poison. You handle it with kid gloves, as they say. Spread a little on your handkerchief and inhale it, let a few drops go on the skin, and—phut, you're dead. No pain, no symptoms, no traces, just dead." He laughed heartily.

"Then it's surely no use."

"Ah, that is the local difficulty, the adjustment needed. It is the beloa juice that makes the etching, you understand. We have to find out how to counteract its poisonous effects, yet it must remain effective. We cannot be like the Indians and mix it with mud—it has to be a liquid. So we try different mixtures. This is Noscan 7, the seventh mixture. We tried the first six on mice, rabbits, guinea pigs."

"With what effect?"

"They all died. That is our local difficulty. But enough of Noscan. Shall we see each other this evening? Go out on the town? I have arranged a little something."

Heinz came round to Courtney's hotel after dinner. They had drinks and talked, then they met two of what Heinz called his professional amateurs, housewives ready to make a little extra money, but in the end Courtney declined the chance of a peccadillo, feeling a guilt about being unfaithful to Thelma which had never touched him in relation to Evelyn. Muller took one of the professional amateurs back to his apartment, but Courtney gave money to his and apologized for not being in the mood.

He spent a sleepless night. It was true he had accepted that Evelyn would always be there, but that was based on the belief that anything else was impossible. She had known about and tolerated the peccadilloes, known about and tolerated Thelma. What was it she had said? "Marriage consists of putting up with things." He saw years and years of toleration ahead, years in which she would get

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monstrously fat, plumping up like a giant cushion. And she would know always, as she seemed to, just what he was thinking and doing, and would put up with it. The prospect appalled him. And in the back of his mind there echoed those words of Thelma's: "If Evelyn weren't there, I might want to have you for keeps." He changed it mentally to *I long to have you for keeps.*

All this—he had to be honest with himself and admit it—would never have come to the front of his mind but for Heinz's talk about Noscan and the little bottle of NX. He had asked one or two questions—casually, quite casually—while they waited for the professional amateurs, and Heinz had been delighted to expand on his discovery. The poison worked by inhalation, by drinking, by contact with the skin. It caused no pain (very important, Courtney thought—he would never have considered anything painful), and left no traces (equally important). Rabbits and guinea pigs just keeled over, suffering heart failure (Evelyn was overweight).

Courtney thought and thought about it. He was a cautious man, and if there had been the smallest possibility of detection, he would never have considered the idea. But there was no such possibility. If Heinz had exaggerated and the whole thing failed, nobody would know.

The problem, then, was to get access to the bottle without being seen by Heinz. But there again, he told himself, if no opportunity arose he would take it as a sign that he should leave the whole thing alone, have nothing to do with it. Nonetheless he prepared himself by buying a tiny phial, a little pipette, and a pair of rubber gloves.

In the end, that particular problem was solved with absurd ease, as if by destiny. He always stayed three days at the laboratories, and on each day visited Pal to chat with Heinz. On the last day, Heinz's assistant was on the next floor searching some records in the library and Heinz was called to the telephone, so that he was alone in the laboratory. The little bottle was three-quarters full. He put on the rubber gloves, poured no more than half an inch of liquid into his phial, and stoppered it. The operation took no more than a few seconds. He was pleased to see the total steadiness of his hand.

After that, the car of destiny bore him onwards. If he had any doubts about the need for action they were removed when, on his return, he found Thelma installed in the spare bedroom. The Kensington lease was still presenting problems, Thelma had had a row with the niece, Evelyn thought it only right that she should come and stay.

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"After all, Thelma's almost one of the family," Evelyn said in the placid unshockable way that succeeded in shocking, and even disgusting him. Thelma looked at him with sparkling dark eyes and seemed amused by his reaction. The limit came when, a couple of nights after his return, Evelyn said, "If you want to go in to Thelma tonight, I shall understand."

He was horrified. "Certainly not. Under our roof, how can you suggest such a thing?"

"What does it matter whose roof you're under?"

He could not explain. The essence of his affair with Thelma was its romantic, exciting quality. To fornicate with another woman, with his wife's knowledge and compliance, in their own home—the idea was unthinkable. The suggestion removed any lingering doubt about the need for action, sealed Evelyn's fate.

Evelyn had used up her Magical Night. He bought another bottle, unscrewed it, and with the utmost care added the contents of his phial. When he gave it to her she thanked him, then said with her placid smile that they had had few magical nights lately.

He was going away on the following day and said with what he felt false heartiness that if she used it on the day he returned—or even before, if she felt inclined, in preparation as it were—they would see what they would see. He hoped that with this hint, the affair, which was the word he preferred to use, would be over before his return. It seemed wise to be absent. If Heinz should have been mistaken and the procedure was *not* painless, he feared he might be unduly distressed.

He was therefore not greatly surprised when, on the third evening of his four-day tour, he was told that Inspector Jezzard was in the hotel lobby and would like to see him. He was prepared to show shock and a touch of grief, the speech ready prepared. "Good God, Inspector, I can hardly believe it. Evelyn seemed perfectly well when I left home, but of course—now that I think of it, she'd complained of what we both thought were indigestion pains."

The speech, however, was never made. The Inspector, a sharp-eyed, sharp-nosed man accompanied by a sergeant, said, "Mr. Courtney Vance? I have a warrant for your arrest on the charge of wilful murder of one Thelma Hartley—hold up, man."

Courtney Vance had fainted clean away.

His bewilderment was total. How could it conceivably have happened? At first he tried to fence with the Inspector, discover how

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much he knew. How was Courtney accused of administering this so-called poison?

"No point in playing games, Mr. Vance. You know very well it was contained in a bottle of scent called Magical Night."

"And you have been able to isolate the poison in the bottle?"

The Inspector smiled, not pleasantly. "We know where it came from. We know you abstracted a certain amount of a highly toxic plant poison known as NX from your firm's laboratory and added it to the bottle of scent."

"I don't accept that for a moment, but I ask again, have you been able to isolate the poison you say is in that bottle?" There was no reply. Heinz had been right, it was undetectable. "If not, how can you be sure it was present?"

"In the most practical way. Very small quantities from the bottle have been added to food given to rats and mice. They died within half an hour. Painlessly, I understand."

This was a shock. Perhaps he should have been present at the time, after all, to remove the bottle and pour away the contents. The Inspector continued. "When we contacted your friend at the laboratory, Mr. Muller, he confirmed that the effect was exactly that of this particular poison. He then checked the NX bottle and confirmed also that the level was lower than it should have been, although the fact had not previously been noticed."

But why did you have any suspicion at all? he longed to ask. Instead he said, "I admit I gave a bottle of Magical Night to my wife, Evelyn. I certainly didn't give one to Mrs. Hartley."

"It is not suggested that Mrs. Hartley was the intended victim. That was your wife."

"Then how—"

"Mrs. Vance seems to have suspected some joke on your part, a cruel joke she said. According to her, you had an intimate relationship with Mrs. Hartley. Do you wish to comment on that? It isn't important, since we have been able to check on some of the hotels where you stayed together. The bottle was meant for your wife. She gave it to Mrs. Hartley, saying something to the effect that it had not secured any magical nights for her. Mrs. Hartley laughed, opened the bottle, sniffed it, dabbed a little on her hand, then on her face. Within a few minutes she collapsed. In less than an hour she was dead."

Had Evelyn suspected, had her uncanny understanding of him

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gone so far that she realized he meant to do her harm, and deliberately passed on the bottle?

"And then?"

"Your wife called a doctor. By the time he arrived, Mrs. Hartley was dead, apparently from heart failure. The death would have been accepted as natural but for one remarkable thing. It was something your wife noticed. Once it had been pointed out, it was clear that something must be wrong and that further investigation was needed. We were called in, and took it from there."

"*Yes?*" he said. "*Yes?* What was it?"

The Inspector smiled again. "I think Mr. Muller told you not only how powerful NX was, but also of its remarkable properties?"

"He did, but what then? What was it Evelyn saw?"

"It was rather what she did not see. Mrs. Hartley had a red birthmark on one side of her face. She had dabbed a few drops of scent near to it. What your wife noticed was that, within a minute or two of the liquid being applied, the birthmark had completely disappeared."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JAMES POWELL

James Powell's Scheherazadean stories and those about Maynard Bullock and Ganelons I, II, III, and IV are always a treat. And his non-series stories sit beautifully on the imagination as well. His "Death in the Christmas Hour" (January 1983) brought enthusiastic applause from readers. Here is another Christmas-related story from him we expect will prompt the same . . .

THE COFFEE-TABLE BOOK

by JAMES POWELL

There was a time when coffee tables whimpered as Rudy Turpin passed. That little man's canny thumb, people in the Christmas-book business used to say, could predict the desperate pulse of the last-minute shopper in need of a bright, hefty, outsized, and overpriced volume to impress a client or mollify a neglected aunt.

Like most in his field, Turpin was a concept man. He came up with the idea. The actual writing, editing, and art work he hired out. He found his printer in Czechoslovakia or Shanghai and an American publishing house to handle the distribution. He scored his first big success with *Pussy Cats on Parade*. Cat fanciers and military buffs had always been a target of the Christmas-book business. But until Turpin dressed up cats in the uniforms of the armed services of the free world, no one had managed to capture both markets in a single book.

Turpin's next success, a triumph really, broke new ground. His *The Rich Secret Life and Lonely Death of Howard Hughes* was the first of what are today known in the Christmas-book business as life-and-deathers. The Hughes photobiography was put together and in the bookstores by mid-November of the same year the billionaire

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recluse died. But success breeds imitators. By the time Turpin's fourth life-and-deather, *The Gallant Life and Tragic Wasteful Death of Anwar Sadat*, reached the bookstores five other photobiographies of the Egyptian leader were there to greet it. Others could read the obituary pages, too. The competition threatened to drive Turpin from the field he'd pioneered.

Then one January evening as he watched Nobel laureate Mother Philomena of Bombay on the television news, a message in the old nun's eyes told him she would not survive the year. Being the kind of man who backs his hunches, Turpin secretly sank everything he had into a Mother Philomena book. Within three months the thing was done, except of course for the last chapter, which would cover the circumstances of her passing with photographs of the deathbed, the funeral, the world in mourning, and, finally, the flower-covered grave alone in the rain. Now Turpin's greatest fear was that she'd die on him before September, giving his jackal competitors the time to crank out their trash. All spring and well into summer, he reveled whenever the media showed Mother Philomena striding, hale and hearty, through Third World squalor and bending with quick, supple back to comfort a crying child. Then August came and went. Turpin was home free.

But by mid-October, the printer was pressing for the final chapter and the publicity people were chomping at the bit. For his part, Turpin was in a fever of despair. Would the old nun never die? Then, as if to taunt him, a spry Mother Philomena arrived in New York to open a center for her Little Sisters of the Slums in the South Bronx. Like a man in a dream, Turpin found himself with a pistol in his raincoat pocket and a hired photographer at his side stalking the woman up and down those treacherous streets. Who knows what he might have done if he and the photographer hadn't been mugged and robbed—cameras, wallets, pistol—when they tried to head off the nun and her entourage by taking a dark shortcut.

The day she flew back to India, Turpin sold the plates of the unfinished *The Saintly Life and Prayerful Death of Mother Philomena of Bombay* for pennies on the dollar to an entrepreneur with a deeper faith in human mortality. Turpin used the money to crank out a quick Christmas paperback he'd been saving for a rainy day. But *The Pussy Cats on Parade Coloring Book* was not a success. The word in the business was that old Turpin's thumb had lost its magic. That had been four years ago.

Well, by god, the word was wrong! Rudy Turpin set the razor down

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on the edge of the rusty porcelain sink and wiped the shaving cream from his smiling face. By god, it was a sweetheart of a concept. The coffee-table book to end them all! He was still smiling at himself when the doorbell rang.

The hallway smelled of old cabbage and fresh roach powder. Primo Grimaldi took his finger from the doorbell. He was beginning to regret he'd let the crow in Turpin's voice over the phone lure him down here. Years before, when that was the only kind of gambling he did, Grimaldi had made a nice piece of change bankrolling Turpin's first solo venture. What was the thing called? *The Wonders of the Western World: From the Book of Kells to Orson Welles.* Grimaldi was standing there wondering if lightning could strike twice when Turpin, his cheeks smelling of menthol, opened the door and invited him in.

Grimaldi sat on the swayback couch and watched Turpin pour two drinks from the bottle on the television set. He shook his head in answer to the little man's "How's cheese?"

"I'm in drive-in dry clean now," he said. " 'Spot and Stop.' Five outlets." Two years ago, Grimaldi would have said fifteen. But the ponies had eaten up the others, like the cheese business before that. And now like a damn jerk, he'd gotten in over his head again, this time to some very ugly people. He needed an out, a way to pay them off before the interest sucked him dry. Turpin's call coming out of the blue made Grimaldi wonder if maybe his luck wasn't starting to change. Now as the little man ran off at the mouth, Grimaldi suspected that that just might be the case. Turpin was even cocksure enough to apologize for the whiskey, the apartment, and the crummy neighborhood.

"Around here was always a slum," Grimaldi told him. "I grew up two blocks over." He could see his candor impressed Turpin without surprising him. That was Grimaldi's reputation. No horseshit. The straight goods. Grimaldi's word was his bond. All that because he'd never figured their good opinion worth lying for.

Turpin took the chair by the television set and got down to business. "I'm talking the granddaddy of all coffee-table books here." He wig-wagged a hand to indicate what was coming wasn't set in concrete. "Maybe *All You Ever Wanted To Know About Coffee Tables But Were Afraid To Ask.* Whatever. So long as it's about coffee tables. But here's the thing. Recessed into the back cover are these four legs that fold down like on a card table, with two more on the

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front cover so you can set the book down on the floor open or closed. I'm talking coffee table and coffee-table book about coffee tables all rolled up in one. It's like what-do-you-call-it, the container for the thing contained." Turpin went on about the production end and the free publicity a chi-chi idea like this would generate.

To mask his excitement, Grimaldi had to get up and pace, chin in hand, as though considering every word. In fact, his mind was racing far ahead. This wasn't just one Christmas book. It was a whole goddamn industry of Christmas books! What about *The Kitchen-Table Book,* a large-format cookbook bound in red-and-white check with long legs and a hinged acrylic cutting board you could read the recipes through as you chopped? What about *The Pool-Table Book,* the history and statistics of the game bound in green felt and six string pockets around the cover and two cue sticks up the spine? With a hundred percent of something like that going for him, Grimaldi could pay off the very ugly people fast. And no more betting. Then after a few years, he'd sell out and find a warm island somewhere. Damn Turpin, the man had really lucked into something.

Or was it Grimaldi who'd done the lucking-in? He suddenly remembered that he'd parked two blocks away because he wanted to see the burned-out shell of the tenement where he'd grown up. And he remembered the empty lobby downstairs and the empty hallway. As the little man talked on and figured on the back of a magazine, Grimaldi picked up the whiskey bottle by the neck in his handkerchief and stepped behind the chair.

Without looking up from his calculations, Turpin said, "What about Latimer to do the writing? Remember Latimer? He comes cheap. Five six years back he did *The Wonderful World of Credenzas* for Bayliss."

Grimaldi brought the whiskey bottle down hard on the back of Turpin's head.

For twenty-five years, Simon Latimer shared an overstuffed apartment with his older sister while scratching out a living writing in the antique-furniture field. During that time he had watched those he considered his inferiors in mind and taste rise above him to positions of influence with magazines and museums. Nor was he allowed a single show of bitterness or waspish contempt. A writer in his subject must give off the mellow, imperturbable aura of Eighteenth Century wood. Here his long friendship with Quentin Jacobs

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helped, for Jacobs was a failure, too. From boyhood, Jacobs had set his sights on becoming another Edison. But not one of his many inventions had ever gotten off the drawing-board. It was mutual failure as much as anything else that had kept the two men friends, for each took mean warmth from the embers of the other's old dreams.

Then suddenly last year, a company paid Jacobs a thumping fee and royalties for one of his inventions, a battery-driven, pistol-like device which could pop and fire a single kernel or a stream of hot, buttered popcorn a distance of thirty feet with amazing accuracy. They marketed it under the name Hot Shot McPop. The promotion campaign sent the inventor across the country giving demonstrations in department stores and on local television stations. It ended up on the last five minutes of *The Tonight Show* with Jacobs and Johnny Carson crouched down behind opposite ends of the host's desk, firing popcorn into each other's gaping mouths to the accompaniment of Ed McMahon's lazy brown laughter.

Success did not make Jacobs a stranger, though there were times when Latimer sincerely wished it had. Jacobs was always coming by to report new sales figures, show off some expensive purchase, or ask Latimer's advice on furnishing his big new apartment. And of course there were endless discussions about Jacobs' latest brainstorm, a jointed little manikin based on the old skipjack toy that trotted out a rhythm on a wooden paddle.

Now Jacobs' Jogger, as the running-shoed skipjack had been christened, was the sensation of the season, with Hong Kong factories going full blast to keep up with demand. The same day Latimer learned he had not been named curator of the new museum to be built around the Chalfont collection of Biedermeier furniture and that four years of putting himself at the disposal of the insufferable Mrs. Chalfont and her insufferable ebony pilasters had come to nothing, Jacobs made his second appearance with Johnny Carson, this time right after the monologue.

It was all more than Latimer could bear. He rose early the next morning, fixed in his resolve to serve the ungrateful god of furniture no more. First he visited a chemist acquaintance, a collector who coveted a certain millefiori paperweight enough to trade Latimer poison for it. Latimer spent the rest of the morning putting his affairs in order and writing a suicide note, which his sister who was out of town for a few days would find when she returned. Then he put on his coat, slipped the vial of poison into a trouser pocket, and

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headed for the door, intending to spit in his god's eye by killing himself in some quiet unfurnished corner of the park.

The phone rang as he reached for the doorknob. Latimer smiled bitterly and shook his head. No, he'd made up his mind. Life didn't deserve another chance. Still, the call might be for his sister. Latimer imagined himself making an urbane addition to his suicide note. "P.S. Millie called and wants you to call her back." He picked up the receiver to find Primo Grimaldi on the line. Was Latimer available to prepare another manuscript for the Christmas trade? Intrigued by what the man called the ultimate coffee-table book, Latimer agreed to stop by to discuss the project. After all, Grimaldi's apartment was right on the way to the park.

Ten minutes later, Latimer was sitting with an untouched drink in his hand, caught up in his host's proud and slightly drunken flow of words. Latimer found the basic idea a stunning one. But of course Grimaldi had the uncultured man's knack of not knowing when to stop. He, Latimer, would execute the thing perfectly and without these foolish elaborations of pool-table and kitchen-table books and all the rest. He'd start with *The Chippendale Coffee-Table Book* with kneed legs and ball-and-claw feet. The text would discuss the history and aesthetic of the style. He might even include a witty section on what a Chippendale coffee table might have looked like had such a creature ever existed. The next year he would do a Sheraton or perhaps a Hepplewhite with an inlaid cover. One year he might even do a Biedermeier that would make Mrs. Chalfont squirm.

Any lingering scruple standing in the way of Latimer doing what he now knew he had to do vanished when Grimaldi stopped in midsentence to say, "Hey, what say we do one on anthropology? Primitive fertility rites. We'll call it *The Multiplication-Table Book.*" Grimaldi chuckled. "Get it?"

Here Latimer asked if he might have a zest of lemon for his drink and, while his host was in the kitchen, he emptied the vial of poison into the man's half filled glass. What did he need Grimaldi for? His friend Jacobs had more than enough money to back the project.

His first morning back from Los Angeles, Quentin Jacobs strode out of his new apartment building and smiled at the day. The doorman wanted to get him a cab, but Jacobs waved him away. Here was a chance to try out his latest acquisition. Going to the curb, he hailed one himself, using his handsome new cane with the carved ivory handle. He stepped inside the vehicle and, sitting with the

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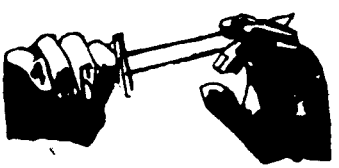
cane between his knees, he wondered why Latimer wanted to see him so urgently. Not that he begrudged his friend the time. No, he would always be able to work Latimer in. In fact, Latimer had become one of his most delicious pleasures. It was a wise man who said that to be happy it wasn't enough that you succeed. Your best friend must also fail. Poor old Latimer.

Of course, success had its problems, too, sweet though they might be. Those *Tonight Show* appearances could become addictive. Johnny was such a nice guy and that Ed McMahon, what a card. But in Jacobs' business, you were only as good as your next idea. And at the moment he was drawing a blank in that department. How do you top something like Jacobs' Jogger?

Jacobs gave a prosperous sigh and leaned forward to rest his chin on the four ivory snakes who twined to form the handle of his wonderful new sword cane. Then he made his mouth into a crooked little smile. My, my, my, he could already see the look on poor old Latimer's face when he showed off the engraving along the fine Toledo blade.



CRIMINALIMERICK

THE FUN COUPLE

by D. R. BENSEN

One thing about the Macbeths
Caused raised eyebrows and sharply drawn breaths:
Their belief that a party
Was simply not hearty
Without at least two sudden deaths.

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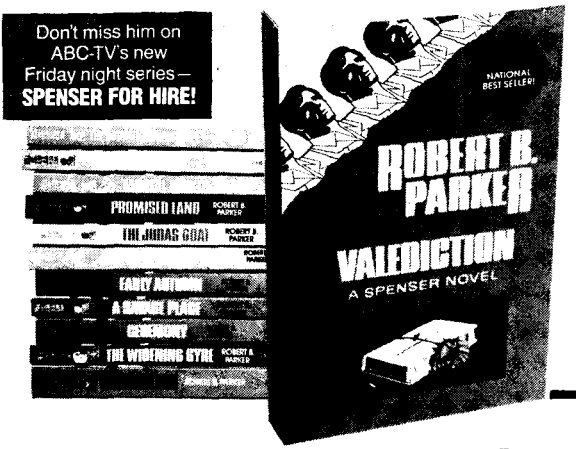

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SPENSER
by Robert B. Parker

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Preacher was right: without hope, a man might just as well be dead. Although Gene-Boy still thought that the drink and the war and no decent job went a long ways toward bringing on the gloom. Or at least bringing on the hell-raising that brought on the gloom.

Two pieces of very good news: this new story from Joyce Harrington, and the fact that her third novel, Doom, *is to be published by St. Martin's Press . . .*

A LETTER TO AMY

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

"Dear Amy,

Did you get my last letter? Why don't you write? Just a note saying Hi, Pop, would be nice. The circus is in town. I'm not planning to go, but it reminds me of the time you and me went. Remember the clown who kept tripping over the little white dog? Every time he fell down, you laughed and laughed. I guess you're too big for circuses now. Why don't you send me a picture? I don't have even one. I guess maybe your mother is taking these letters and not letting you have them. If that's what she's doing, I just want to tell her it's not right. No matter what I did or didn't do, you're still my little girl and I love you. And I miss you."

Gene-Boy signed the letter "Love, Daddy," and folded it up. It wasn't much of a letter, he knew, but he'd worn himself out struggling to write long letters to both of them about how much he'd changed and what he was doing and how Jesus had come into his life and made a new man of him. Letters that just seemed to disappear into the blue and never brought back an answer.

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No, he wasn't planning to go to the circus. He wasn't planning to go anywhere, just to the machine shop and back again, listen to the preacher on Sunday, in between read the Bible after supper and sometimes the newspaper. That's where he'd seen the ad for the circus. It reminded him so much of the old days, and Amy's little fingers digging into his wrist while she squirmed and giggled and tried not to miss a single thing going on in the dinky little ring spread out before them. He could feel those little fingers on his wrist like burning tips of cigarettes.

Gene-Boy didn't smoke any more, and that was a blessing. He didn't drink, either, but he didn't have much choice about that, so it didn't count as a full-fledged blessing. It was a good thing, though. If you counted it all up, it was probably drink that got him where he was today. Drink and his own evil ways. Preacher made him see that. Praise the Lord.

He wrote Amy's name and address on the envelope, slid the letter inside, and stuck his last red, white, and blue stamp up in the corner. Lying down on his bunk, he tried to tune out the sounds around him so he could think about Georgina. How pretty she was back when he first caught sight of her. Wild, too. She'd do any crazy thing on a dare. Like the time she climbed out on the courthouse flagpole and stayed there until the Fire Department came and got her down. Got her picture in the paper for that one. Asked why she did it, she said, "Just wanted to liven things up a bit."

That was Georgina, always livening things up. Singing in the morning, dancing all night. Laughing all day long, at everything and everybody. They were quite a pair in those days, Gene-Boy and Georgina, always doing something outrageous.

And when the black mood came on him, it was only Georgina who could travel the road with him and bring him back alive. He was always sorry later for the things he did to her those times. The black eyes and fat lips, the scar where she had to have her hand stitched up, the names he called her and the things he blamed on her. She always seemed to know that he didn't mean them, that it was his own self he was fighting with, the part of him that had no hope and nothing to live for. Three times she'd kept him from killing himself.

All that was over now.

Gene-Boy reached for his Bible but didn't open it. The lights would be going out soon. He didn't need the lights to read what he wanted to read. He knew it by heart. "The heart of the sons of men is full

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of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead." Hard words, but true. Too true.

Preacher had told him about that one, old Ecclesiastes, and made him see what it meant—to him, Gene-Boy, personally. Preacher said that all the time he was walking around the earth hell-raising and being bad, he was filling up his heart with evil and turning himself into a living dead man. And the black mood was just the stored-up evil in his heart tempting him toward the greatest sin of all, turning himself into a *dead* dead man. Preacher was right: without hope, a man might just as well be dead. Although Gene-Boy still thought that the drink and the war and no decent job went a long ways toward bringing on the gloom. Or at least bringing on the hell-raising that brought on the gloom.

He picked up his letter to Amy and ran his finger along the unsealed flap of the envelope. Maybe he wouldn't send it after all. None of the others had done any good. Amy would be what now, twelve or thirteen? Old enough to write to him if she wanted to, even without Georgina knowing about it. Old enough to find out where he was if Georgina wouldn't tell her. Did she ever ask about him? Did she remember him at all? All these years and no word.

The lights went out as they always did, without warning. And as always the men on either side of him groaned and some of them stamped their feet. Gene-Boy welcomed the darkness, even though it wasn't completely dark—there was always a light on in the corridor so the guards could see into the cellblock in case there was any mischief or trouble. In the darkness, Gene-Boy could rest his eyes and his mind from the grey plainness of day-after-day and conjure up pictures that were more pleasing.

He made a picture of himself getting off the Greyhound bus, still in his uniform, so glad to see home again even though there wasn't anybody there to meet him. He hadn't let anybody know he was coming—he didn't want any fuss made over him, even though he had medals and wound scars and papers that said he was a hero. Still and all, he was a trifle disappointed that no one took any notice of him when he stepped off that bus right in the middle of the town's suppertime. He'd been proud to go to Vietnam and wanted to be proud of coming back. Georgina would have been proud of him.

But he didn't even know Georgina on that day—didn't know she was working in that cocktail lounge catty-corner across from the bus depot, just waiting on the day when he would come staggering through the door and order up a beer for himself. That day wouldn't

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come for some little while yet. In the picture in his mind of the day of his homecoming, Georgina wasn't in it yet and the town was ordinary—changed but still the same, with the streetlights just coming on in the late purple dusk. It was summer and hot, with the smell of car exhaust hanging heavy over the street. Fifteen years later, he could still smell that evening air.

He had decided to treat himself to a taxi. The driver was a black man—young, about his own age—with a thick neck and big shoulders like a football player. The neck and shoulders made Gene-Boy feel he had to come on strong.

"Boy, you know the way out to the Watkins place?"

"Never heard of it."

"You know Twelve Mile Road?"

"I know it."

"Well, just keep going out it till I tell you to stop."

"How far?"

"Till we get there."

"Five miles? Ten miles? Two hundred miles?"

"What the hell difference does it make?"

"More than ten miles, I got to charge you double."

"You shouldn't charge me at all. See this uniform? Last week this uniform was all covered up with jungle slime and gook blood. This uniform's seen action."

"Was you in it at the time?"

"Now what kind of remark is that?" Gene-Boy recalled the feeling of hurt that made him want to haul out the picture he had of himself standing over that dead Vietcong who'd tried to sneak up on him and his buddies. He'd saved his buddies' lives and he wasn't ashamed of the fact. "You some kind of peace freak?"

"Easy, man. I been there. It don't buy free taxi rides or free nothing else. Now how far you be wanting to go?"

Gene-Boy scrunched down in the back seat and muttered, "Nine and a half miles."

The driver laughed. "All right," he said, "I won't be charging you double, you being a fellow victim. But you understand I got to come back empty and that uses up gas."

"I ain't no victim," Gene-Boy muttered.

Skip over the ride out of town, past scenes Gene-Boy remembered as if they'd been part of someone else's life—gas stations, drive-ins, the bowling alley, car lots—thinning out into patchy fields and junk yards. It wasn't pretty, not in the way he'd remembered it as pretty

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while he was over in the heat and the stink. Driving past it, looking at it, seeing the pale, beefy people moving about in it, he yearned for the dense green he'd left behind and the thin, brown women who'd giggled at his jokes. It was peculiar. He didn't understand what was going on, except that he didn't seem to belong in either place. Skip over that part.

The house, when they pulled up in front of it, looked small and mean. Even in the gathering darkness, he could see that it needed paint. The lights were on and Gene-Boy was grateful for that. What if nobody'd been home? He paid the driver and gave him a good tip. The driver got out to help him with his duffelbag.

"Don't bother," said Gene-Boy. "I hauled it half across the world. I guess I can haul it into my own house."

"You ever want to talk about things," the driver said, "you mostly can find me by the bus station."

"Don't guess I will," said Gene-Boy. "What's there to talk about?"

The driver shrugged. "Some guys have trouble fitting themselves back in. Sometimes we get together and just talk about it. It helps."

"I won't be needing any help," said Gene-Boy and he stomped up onto the porch, deliberately making noise so they'd know he'd arrived.

The taxi drove away.

Gene-Boy tried to open the front door. It was locked. That made him mad. Since when did they lock the door against him? He kicked at the door and rattled the knob. Inside the house, a dog started up. Since when did they get a dog? They hadn't written to him much. His mother had sometimes, mostly about the weather and the operations she was always having. She'd never mentioned a dog. He hadn't had a letter in about six months. He hadn't written a letter in longer than that.

The dog was barking on the other side of the door now, scraping at it with hard, quick claws. He heard his father's voice yell, "Shut up! I'm coming!"

Gene-Boy waited, trying on a smile, feeling silly and changing it to a stern, serious look. Save the smile for his mother. She'd be glad to see him. She'd have fun coaxing him to eat. He wasn't sure how his father would be. The old man hadn't thought much of his going into the Army. He never did think much of anything Gene-Boy thought of on his own. Always had to be one-up on him.

The door opened and the dog shot out onto the porch, a medium-sized yellow dog, fat and bare-looking. It yipped and growled, making

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nervous, feinting lunges at his shoes. His father stood looking at him. Despite himself, Gene-Boy felt a smile spreading his lips. He couldn't help it, even though it made him feel lower than the nasty yellow dog.

His father said, "Oh, it's you. I might have known. I had a dream the other night."

"Can I come in?" Gene-Boy asked.

"I guess you better. Don't plan on staying, though."

Gene-Boy edged past his father and dumped his duffelbag in the hall. Here again, everything looked the same but different. Smaller. He peered into the front room. Same furniture, same rug, same picture of a sad-eyed clown hanging over the couch—everything worn and dusty, newspapers and stuff all over everything. His mother would never let things get that way.

"Where's Ma?" he asked.

"Gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" Surely she would have written to him if she was going somewhere. People like his mother and father didn't get divorced. They'd put in too many years together. His mother'd been born again. Born-again Christians stuck it out, even if it got hairy. And sometimes it did. Gene-Boy'd seen his father smack his mother around ever since he was a little kid. But she'd never leave him. "Where's she gone to?" he asked again.

"She died. I guess nobody told you."

Gene-Boy just stood there. The yellow dog trotted across the front room and jumped up onto the couch as if he belonged there. His mother wouldn't have allowed that.

From the kitchen, a voice called out, "Who is that, Eugene?"

His father shouted back, "Just my son. I told you about him."

Gene-Boy heard slippers slapping against the hall floor. He looked up and saw a youngish woman ambling toward him. Long yellow hair same color as the dog's hanging down around a fat, pale face; big green eyes, bulgy like a frog's, staring at him; baggy jeans and a billowing flowered smock. Was she just fat or was she pregnant?

"This my wife," his father said. "Sandra."

"Howdo," Sandra said. "Stay for supper? I'll throw in another TV dinner."

"Thanks," said Gene-Boy. "Pleased to meet you."

Sandra smiled. "Your daddy didn't tell me you was so good-looking. But he's a handsome man himself, so it makes sense."

Gene-Boy looked at his father. The old man was grinning fit to

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burst. The old fool. Him, handsome? Some people'll believe anything. Sandra slip-slopped back toward the kitchen.

"See why you can't plan on staying?" his father said. "We'll be needing your room. Already got a crib in there."

"When did my mother die?" Gene-Boy asked.

"Oh, four, five months ago. It was real quick. She didn't suffer much."

"When's the baby due?"

"Any minute now." His father smirked. "Never thought I'd be a daddy again. Your poor mother was too sickly for much of that."

"When did you and Sandra get married?"

"Matter of fact, it was just last week. Thought we better do it before the baby came. If we'd known you was coming, we could've held off. You could've been best man."

"How long have you and Sandra—?"

"Couple or three years now. Oh, don't go getting upset. Your mother never knew anything about it. But even if she did, she wouldn't have minded. After all those operations, all she wanted was me to leave her alone. There wasn't much left of her there at the end."

"What if she hadn't died? What would you and Sandra have done?"

"Nothing, I guess. I mean, she would still be having the baby and I would be going out to see her just like I been doing. It's a lot better this way."

"I guess so," said Gene-Boy. "Well, is it okay if I sleep here tonight? I sent the taxi back to town."

"You'll have to bed down on the couch. I sold your bed."

"I've slept in worse places."

His father laughed, false hearty. "I bet you have. I just bet you have. That Army life ain't no picnic, I guess you found out."

"No picnic," Gene-Boy echoed.

Gene-Boy got himself a room in town up over the Tulip Tree Café, next to the newspaper office. The room smelt of all the home-cooking that had ever been done in the Tulip Tree, fifty years' worth of chicken grease and boiled greens. Just breathing it, Gene-Boy hardly had to eat, but he went down to the café every evening and ate what he'd been smelling. Looked up some of his old buddies and found out that one of them, Roy Blanchard, was working for the newspaper, writing up house fires and automobile accidents on the interchange, once in a while a murder or a suicide. Roy took Gene-Boy home to

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meet his wife and little boy. It was a pretty life, safe and comfortable, and it made Gene-Boy mad. While he'd been off in the jungle, his good old buddy Roy Blanchard was living the good life and making a place for himself. And now Gene-Boy couldn't get any kind of job that was worth having.

Not that he didn't try. He took it into his mind that after all the filth and mud he'd been through, he wanted a clean job. He wanted to wear a suit and a tie. He bought himself a Sears Roebuck outfit, shoes and all, and wore it into two banks, one insurance office, the town's only travel agency, a bunch of real-estate sales offices, and a place that sold cemetery plots. He got the impression that the people he saw couldn't wait for him to leave so they could bust out laughing at him, although one sweet-faced old lady advised him to get himself into the community college and learn something. "To make yourself more marketable," she'd said. But what would he do in college with a bunch of kids when he was a man and had been doing a man's work in Vietnam?

Roy Blanchard offered to put in a word for him at the newspaper. He could drive a truck, couldn't he? But Gene-Boy knew he couldn't stand that, Roy writing the stories on the front page and him trucking the bundled newspapers all over town and out into the countryside. He was any man's equal and certainly Roy's, and he wouldn't be beholden for crumbs.

The more he got turned down, the madder Gene-Boy got. His money was running out. His old car—at least his father hadn't sold *that*—needed new tires. And to top it all off, Sandra had popped out a pair of twins, blond-haired little boys, and he was expected to act like a big brother to them. Presents and such. Say how cute they were. Otherwise, he wouldn't be welcome to visit his own old home. He stopped going out there. Couldn't stand to see the old man behaving like a frisky young stallion, couldn't stand the way he googled and gaggled over them babies. Nothing was turning out the way Gene-Boy thought it would.

Long about that time, he met Georgina. Just when he was thinking about leaving town and trying his luck someplace else, Texas or California, he found himself outside the bus depot one evening and there was that same taxi waiting for a passenger. The driver spotted him and called out.

"Hey, man. How's it going?"

Gene-Boy's first instinct was to tell a glowing tale of opportunity about to strike and great wealth about to fall into his lap. But the

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taxi driver's brown eyes took in his cheap polyester finery and the scuff marks on his shoes, and Gene-Boy knew he couldn't carry off the lie.

"Not so hot," Gene-Boy said, leaning on the door of the taxi. "Seems like nobody cares."

"Having yourself a little pity party?" the driver inquired.

Gene-Boy's anger, never very far from the surface these days, flared. "I don't have to listen to that. You wasn't in that cab, I'd punch you right through the sidewalk."

"Hold on," the driver said. "No call to get righteous. What makes you think anybody's supposed to care about you?"

"Huh?" Gene-Boy hadn't thought about that. He'd just assumed that people would be falling all over themselves to give him, the returned hero, a fine job. When it didn't happen, he didn't ask himself why not. He just got madder and madder.

"I need another driver," the black man said. "You got a driver's license?"

"Well, sure," Gene-Boy said. "What do you think?"

"Well, how about it?"

"You mean me work for you?"

"What I mean."

"You own this cab?"

"This and four others. One of them's sitting back in the garage 'cause one of my drivers quit on me. So how about it?"

"Well, I don't know," said Gene-Boy, confused over certain feelings he didn't want to look at too closely.

"Bother you to work for a black man?" the driver asked.

"No, not a bit," Gene-Boy said too quickly. But that was part of it. The other part was that driving a taxi wasn't exactly his idea of a fine, clean job. It wasn't dirty work, like road-paving or trash-hauling, but it sure didn't require a suit and tie. Still and all— "I'll think it over," Gene-Boy said.

"Well, don't think too long." The driver handed him a printed card. "If you want the job, show up here in the morning. I need somebody right away."

Gene-Boy read the card. "Is that you?" he asked. "Harlan W. Harrison?"

The driver nodded. "Everybody calls me Harry."

Gene-Boy stuck his hand through the cab's open window. "Eugene P. Watkins, Jr.," he said, shaking hands. "Everybody calls me Gene-Boy. Could be I'll see you in the A.M."

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"I hope so, Gene-Boy."

"Thanks, Harry."

Gene-Boy walked away from the taxi shaking and dry-mouthed, and wondering why he should be so. He couldn't be mad at Harry for offering him a job. He could be mad at himself for even thinking of taking it. And he knew he would take it. He wasn't fit for anything else. He crossed the street, and as soon as he saw the cocktail lounge he knew that he craved a cold beer more than anything else in the world.

Inside the darkened room, a jukebox wailed an old Hank Williams tune. It suited his mood. Old Hank Williams knew all about the demons that bedeviled men in their souls. Not caring much for the easy companionship of the bar, Gene-Boy sprawled into the first empty booth he saw and blinked his eyes to accustom them to the gloom. Pretty soon a waitress came up to him and said, "Yes, sir?"

Her face floated above him, pale and angelic and sort of misty. He saw black hair, sleek and shiny, and dark eyes that sprang out at him and pinned him to the crumbly leatherette of the booth.

"A beer," he said. "Draft."

She went away, and he watched her go. She was small and trim. Her rear end, in tight jeans, was taut and smooth, but she didn't wiggle the way some girls thought was sexy. Her back was straight and her shoulders looked strong and proud. Gene-Boy sighed.

She brought his beer and a small plastic bowl of pretzel sticks. He said, "Thank you." She smiled.

He nodded toward the jukebox and said, "You like Hank Williams?"

"Oh, yeah," she said. "And I like the Beatles and Bob Dylan and vanilla ice cream and skinnydipping and a lot of things I haven't even tried yet."

Gene-Boy took a swig of his beer, so cold it made his teeth ache. "How do you know you like them if you haven't tried them yet?"

"How do I know I won't?" she said. "I haven't seen you in here before."

"Could be because I never been in here before. But now I think I might be coming in here a lot."

She smiled and went away to tend to other customers.

Later, when Gene-Boy was ordering up his third beer, he asked the waitress her name.

"What you want to know that for?" she asked, not in a flirty way but kind of mean and edgy.

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"Well," said Gene-Boy, feeling like fooling and having a good time, "if I'm gonna marry you, I got to know what to call you."

"Huh!" she said. "Will you just listen to that!" But when she brought him the beer, she said, "My name's Georgina. What's yours?"

And that was how it all began. He woke up the next morning in Georgina's bed with the smell of fresh coffee nudging him to get up. She lived in a little cottage not far from the railroad station where no trains came any more. Gene-Boy had no recollection of how he'd got there, but peering out the bedroom window he saw his old car parked beside the house and in the near distance the abandoned red-brick station building. He remembered that he was supposed to turn up at Harry's garage.

In the kitchen, he found Georgina frying up sausage. "How come you let me sleep so late?" he asked. "I got a job to go to."

"I know," she said. "You told me. It's not late. I was planning to bring you breakfast in bed."

Gene-Boy didn't know what to say. Nobody'd been nice to him in so long, he didn't know how to behave when it happened. "I got to go," he said and, looking for an excuse, he brushed at his rumpled suit. "I got to go change my clothes."

"Well, take a sausage sandwich with you," she said. And she began slapping the fried sausage patties between two hunks of bread.

The last thing Gene-Boy heard as he left the house was her sweet voice singing "Careless Love."

Harlan W. Harrison put him to work that very morning. He showed him how to work the car radio and the taximeter, and told him the best places to wait for fares: the mall outside town, the two movie theaters when the pictures let out, the hospital. He introduced him to his tall, skinny wife who operated the dispatcher's radio from the living room in their house next to the garage.

"Job pays two dollars an hour," Harry said.

Gene-Boy frowned.

"Plus you get to keep all tips."

Gene-Boy remembered that he'd tipped Harry real well the night he'd taken the taxi out to his father's house. If everybody tipped as well as that, he'd do all right.

But everybody didn't. Gene-Boy found that out on his very first call—a feeble old lady from one of the big houses on the hill who had to go to her doctor. Even though he helped her into the cab and

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out of it and was polite when she complained about the bumps in the road, all she gave him was a measly dime. That first day, Gene-Boy figured he got a good close look at human nature, and he didn't like what he saw. The women were the worst, expecting him to help them with their kids and their packages and then trying to cheat him on the fare. But the men weren't much better, accusing him of taking the long way around, or carrying on with a girl in the back seat as if he wasn't there at all. When he'd put in his eight hours, he drove back to Harry's garage in a foul temper. Mrs. Harry silently collected his money and paid him sixteen dollars out of it. That plus the tips he'd been grudgingly given made twenty dollars and change more than he'd had in the morning. It was sure as hell no way to get rich.

"See you tomorrow," said Mrs. Harry.

"Yeah. Maybe."

He drove in his own car back downtown straight to the cocktail lounge, where he hoped to find Georgina. She wasn't there. Another girl with big wobbly bosoms and a beehive hairdo came to wait on him. He ordered a whiskey with a beer chaser. When she brought it, he asked her where Georgina was.

"Her day off," she said.

Gene-Boy felt betrayed. After last night, she could have at least told him. But he couldn't even remember what they'd done last night. All he could remember was waking up in her bed, and if he woke up there they must have done *something*. After his third or fourth whiskey, he realized that Georgina was sitting across from him in the booth.

"Where you been?" she demanded.

"Sitting right here," he said. "Where *you* been?"

"Waiting for you. I thought we had a date. You said we'd go dancing."

Gene-Boy couldn't bear to admit that he'd forgotten. "Well, let's go," he said. "I had a rough day. I needed to get a little fortified."

"Well, how about you buy me a drink? Unless you like drinking alone."

She drank her vodka and Seven-Up in little ladylike sips, but it disappeared fast enough. When she finished it, she stood up and twirled around in her high heels, sending her short skirt ballooning out like a parachute. "Let's go," she said. "I could dance all night."

Gene-Boy wasn't sure he could. The black mood was on him and all he wanted to do was smash things. People. But Georgina looked

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so pretty and happy. She was the only one in the world who didn't treat him mean and he wanted to please her. He crawled out of the booth and stood up, swaying and grinning.

"Pretty little thing," he said. "Let's go get married."

"Not tonight," she said. "Maybe tomorrow."

They didn't get married the next day or the next. They drifted through the fall and the winter, drinking, dancing, quarreling, making up. Gene-Boy moved out of his little room over the Tulip Tree Café and into Georgina's house. He got in fights now and then if he thought some guy was looking the wrong way at Georgina. He knew Georgina didn't invite the looks—she wasn't like that—but he blamed her for them anyway. They went ice-skating on a little pond out in the middle of nowhere and fell through the ice, but only landed knee-deep in muck that stank up their clothes like a dead squirrel when they got warmed up. Georgina laughed at everything, good times and bad times alike. Sometimes Gene-Boy wondered why she liked him so much, but he never dared to ask her. He was afraid he wouldn't like the answer. It could be she felt sorry for him.

Especially after he lost his job driving taxi for Harry Harrison for decking a drunk who was trying to pick a fight with him from the back seat. Left him sprawled in the road—with a broken jaw, as it turned out. But the guy had it coming to him. He had no call to bring the police into it and sue the cab company. Gene-Boy thought Harry should've stuck by him, but instead he turned cold and mean.

"I can't afford to keep you on," he said. "I've had complaints about you before this. You got some hell of a chip on your shoulder."

"I don't need your stinking job," Gene-Boy muttered.

"You got some unlearning to do, boy. You go around acting like you're still in the jungle."

"Seems like it to me," said Gene-Boy. "I don't let nobody crap on me."

"Live and learn," Harry said. "You got a lot of it to do."

After that, the black mood descended and wouldn't let up. He was only happy when he was with Georgina, but even that was only a glimmer of what he believed was rightfully his. He wanted a new car to drive Georgina around in. He wanted to give her a color TV in place of the old black-and-white number she had. He wanted to take her on a trip to Las Vegas with money to burn.

Not that she was asking for any of those things. Georgina never

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asked for anything. She always said, "If I can't get it for myself, I don't guess I need it."

She said, "You're the only thing I'll ever need."

But she still wouldn't marry him, no matter how many times he asked her. Not even after Amy was born. "I know who her daddy is," she would say, "and so does her daddy. So what do I need with a piece of legal paper?"

It hurt Gene-Boy a whole lot the day Georgina went down and got food stamps. She'd given up her waitressing job and he was glad of that. No more guys looking at her and trying to get their hands on her. But all he was ever able to do was now-and-then laboring work, the dirty jobs he'd started out sneering at. After a day's work, he could smell the dirt on himself and he despised himself for it. Georgina would make him get in the bathtub and scrub his back and tickle him and work up a big lather of sweet-smelling shampoo on his head. But the dirt smell never left his nostrils. The smell of the jungle. The smell of blood.

Amy made him happy, too, once she got past the smelly diaper, spit-up, and sour-milk stage and started walking and talking like a little lady. She would climb into his lap, unbutton and button his shirt, and whisper her breathy secrets in his ear. Sometimes it was "I love you best." Sometimes it was "Mommy is a sillyhead." And if she whispered, "Can I have a pogostick?" or a tricycle or a Tony the Pony or a doll with real nylon hair, he'd go right off and get it for her even if he had to give up his whiskey for a week.

When Amy started kindergarten, Georgina went back to work, this time doing the breakfast and lunch shift at a nearby truckstop so she could pick up Amy after school. Gene-Boy wasn't well pleased. "Truckers are a horny bunch," he said. "You just watch your step."

"I can take care of myself," Georgina told him.

It seemed to Gene-Boy that she didn't laugh so much any more. She didn't sing around the house. He couldn't remember when they had gone dancing. And when did all that start happening?

He said, "It's been six years, going on seven. Ain't it time we got married?" He knew he'd feel better if he was surer.

She just looked at him and went on out the door.

Gene-Boy brooded. He drank—at home alone when he wasn't working, in his car that was practically falling apart and couldn't go as fast as he wanted it to, even when he was working from a thermos bottle he pretended was full of coffee. His only joy was Amy.

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Pretty little Amy, with her black hair like Georgina's and her blue eyes like his own, climbed into his lap every night and wiggled her little butt around like a bird settling into its nest. She told him about school and the silly old teacher and the mean boys who pinched her.

One night she whispered, "Danny says I'm pretty."

Gene-Boy laughed. "Well, you sure are, honey," he said. "And who's this Danny? Is he your boy friend?"

"Oh, no," Amy whispered. "He's Mommy's."

Gene-Boy stopped laughing. He got very quiet. Georgina was making an angry-sounding racket in the kitchen. He held Amy hard by her small shoulders and said, "He's Mommy's what?"

"What you said." Amy's voice slid into a loud whine. "Boy friend, boy friend, boy friend. That hurts." She tried to wriggle out of his grip.

Gene-Boy held onto her, slapped her once to make her quiet down. "How do you know that?" he demanded.

Amy's blue eyes stared shock at him before she began blubbering. "He kisses her," she sobbed. "In the car. He gives me M & M's."

Georgina came into the room. "What's going on in here?" she asked.

Gene-Boy got up, dumping Amy to the floor. She started howling. Gene-Boy stood over her, weaving back and forth, the blackness descending blacker than ever before. "Who's this Danny?" he shouted.

Georgina looked at Amy writhing and screaming on the floor. "What did you do to her?" she shouted back.

"What have *you* been doing with her? Taking her in the car with you while you're out acting the tramp? Who's this Danny?"

Georgina's eyes shot scorn at him. She picked up Amy and crooned in her ear, "Hush, now, baby. Don't cry. Supper's ready soon and then you can have a Twinkie."

And off she went back to the kitchen without giving Gene-Boy any kind of answer.

Gene-Boy followed her, his hands tingling with the need to make things right. He found her sitting in a kitchen chair, cuddling Amy and singing to her about Mr. Frog and Miss Mousie. She heard him coming up behind her and stopped her song.

She said, "I think you better pack up your things and shift along someplace else."

She wouldn't even look at him.

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"You're crazy," he said. "We're gonna get married. You been putting it off long enough."

"You're the crazy one," she said, "if you think I'd marry you. I've stood it as long as I can. It was okay when it was fun, but it hasn't been fun for a long time."

"I suppose you think you could have fun with this Danny?" he shouted at her.

But she didn't answer, just went back to her song. Amy peered up at him out of tearful blue eyes, and then stuck her tongue out.

Gene-Boy stalked off to the bedroom. The whiskey in him roiled in his stomach and fumed in his head. Okay, she wanted him to leave, he'd go. He didn't stick around where he wasn't wanted. She'd be sorry, though. She wasn't so young any more and who'd be interested in a worn-out hag with a brat. Not even this Danny. She'd find out, and then she'd be begging him to come back. He hauled his old Army duffelbag down from the top shelf of the closet. There was something in it but he didn't even look to see what it was, just started stuffing his clothes into it.

But what about Amy? If he left, he wouldn't see Amy every night. She'd be climbing into this Danny's lap and he'd be giving her M & M's. Pretty soon she'd be calling *him* Daddy. No way could Gene-Boy let that happen.

He remembered what it was that had been hiding down in the bottom of his duffelbag all these years. He up-ended the bag and dumped everything he'd packed out onto the bed. The gun plopped out last, on top of the pile of clothes. His old Colt .45, the one he'd carried all the way from Vietnam, the one that had saved his life more times than he could count. It was just as nice-looking now as it was then. He picked it up and hefted it. It felt good in his hand, just like old times. He couldn't remember if it was loaded, though. Probably not.

Gene-Boy was amazed to find three bullets in the magazine. It was like a sign. An omen. They wouldn't be there if he wasn't supposed to do what he was supposed to do. He started back to the kitchen.

Gene-Boy licked the flap of the envelope of his letter to Amy. The picture show was over for the night. He always stopped it just right there.

Somewhere in his mind he knew what had happened, but he never let the picture of it rise up and take him over. He knew it was the

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cause of his being where he was and never likely to get out. And he knew that Danny was only Georgina's brother who'd come back to town after a long while away and talked her into believing Gene-Boy was nothing but a deadbeat drunk and she'd be well rid of him. Danny'd come to visit him once and cried for his sister and his little niece, the only family he had left. All gone. Gene-Boy'd cried, too.

He lifted up his thin mattress and slid his letter to Amy underneath it along with all the others, the hundreds of others, all addressed and sealed and stamped. They made his bed rustle in the night.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Casually, Dora stepped in front of the phone. "Cops might not be the brightest idea," she said delicately. "What I need is you, Kenny. It's simple, if you do the lifting. Mr. Jackson's out of place here is what it comes down to."

A wacky kind of story that might put you in mind of a "The Trouble with Harry" or "Arsenic and Old Lace" or perhaps something from the typewriter of Ron Goulart . . .

A HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Dora was beautiful and more, but under stress she tended to come on like a talking crossword puzzle. Luckily, Ken Macksey was good at inking in the blanks of her conversation.

He was still fumbling at his sodden topcoat when she warned, "You're not staying, lover. Let me lay a supposing-that situation on you. I forget the word for it, but there is one and it always puts me in mind of junkies and needles and like that."

It had been a long day of Manhattan monsoon and elusive cabs, typical Wednesday. Macksey yearned to get into a pair of warm arms with minimum delay. But he was a patient man—impatient CPAs go broke. Gently massaging closed eyelids, he suggested, "Hypothetical."

"That's it! Hypodermic, hypothetical." Dora wound a copper tendril of hair around her finger, jade gaze limpid. "This hypothetical situation is a dead person laid out on my bed in there. One of my old gentlemen."

Macksey sneezed and remarked, "Kind of morbid tonight, aren't we?"

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Dora said: "The thing is, it's not exactly hypothetical." From the way her eyes faltered toward the closed door of the bedroom, she wasn't joking.

"You've got a—a corpse here?"

"Only the one," Dora assured him defensively. "I swear, Kenny, you make me sound like Sweeney Todd. It wasn't my fault, he wanted to come in." Trying to make the best of it, she added, "He looks really peaceful, poor guy. Considering."

"Considering?"

"Considering he has this knife sticking out of his chest," Dora explained. Reading his expression, she became annoyed. "Well, *I* didn't do it. The door buzzed about an hour ago and I peeked through the gizmo like you're always telling me to do. It was nice Mr. Jackson from Jersey, so of course I opened up.

"Mr. Jackson being a class act, it threw me, him walking straight past me. Like he wanted the bathroom in a hurry. Only he went into the bedroom. When I ran after him, he was flat on his back, blood all over his shirt and the knife sticking up. It was moving, from his breathing. Then it stopped."

Dora took a deep breath. "I tried to pull the knife out, so I guess my fingerprints are on it. I can wipe them off, but either way it'll look bad, won't it, Kenny? Suspicious."

"Just a tad," he agreed. He wanted to tear his hair and let rip with a primal scream. Mainly he wanted to be ten years old again and back in Ohio.

Bleakly, he reminded himself that Dora's penchant for elderly platonic admirers, whom she collected as some women acquire poodles or canaries, had struck him as charming. "I'll call the police," he said. "And there's this guy I play squash with. Barnes, Baines, Begley? You'll need a lawyer."

Casually, Dora stepped in front of the phone. "Cops might not be the brightest idea," she said delicately. "What I need is you, Kenny. It's simple, if you do the lifting. Mr. Jackson's out of place here is what it comes down to."

Macksey realized that his emotions, while vivid, were surprisingly calm. Just so had Ken Macksey's farmer father brooded over a runaway tractor embedded in the wreck of his barn, wryly awed at the havoc an apparently reasonable object could wreak.

He shuddered as the damp collar kissed the nape of his neck. "Wow," he breathed.

"That's it in a nutshell," Dora conceded. "Kenny, I didn't search

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Mr. Jackson, I was just trying to find a heartbeat. And then I was looking for his identification. There's not a thing on him, no billfold."

"Run that past me again." He was stalling. Why had she wanted to check the identity of a man whose name she knew?

"All his money has been taken," Dora explained patiently. "Now hoist this aboard, honey: I'm the ex-wife of a con doing time at this very moment for working convention hotels, bopping visiting firemen and robbing them. Here I am with a more-or-less stranger who's a dead person in my bedroom, and *he's* been robbed. Uh—and there's the other thing."

Macksey cracked his knuckles. "There would be. Hit me, Dora."

"I made a little scene down in the lobby a day or so back," she confessed. "That creep at the desk was hassling me for a date. So I threatened to stop his clock."

Knowing that Macksey knew her, Dora pulled a woebegone face. "Only I didn't exactly put it that way," she admitted. "I pulled a knife on him. I said if he didn't act right, I'd cut his heart out."

She was right, the corpse did look peaceful. An elderly man who'd wanted to seem middle-aged—light-grey suit tactfully and therefore expensively cut, pristine suede shoes. The dove-grey shirt was a hideous mess, wet at the base of the knife's handle, moist further out, starting to stiffen at the huge stain's limits.

Macksey's uncle had been the town mortician and his brother was a doctor—he could be objective about a dead body and examine it without qualms. He was too worried to experience them, anyway.

Behind him, subdued, Dora said, "You sound like a cop, Kenny. See what I mean about the real cop jumping to conclusions?"

Refusing to be diverted, he insisted, "If you knew he was Jackson, why look for ID?"

"I just called him that, dummy—in my head. Well, look at him. What else would I call him? All my old gentlemen have names I give them. I'd see him in the deli or that pocket park down the block. Mr. Jackson was like my dad, he called me 'Girlie'—not right off, but after a while, when he passed the time of day."

Macksey pushed her out of the room and shut the door behind them. "So you couldn't possibly have killed him."

"Whose side are you on?"

Macksey wondered why he couldn't find a cigarette, before recalling that he'd given them up years before. "What the hell were you doing with a knife the other day?"

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Dora sighed. "I was cleaning house and found this overnight bag of Daryl's mixed in with my stuff from when I took off after the divorce. I wanted no part of it.

"There were shirts and socks and stuff, I gave them to the thrift shop over on Seventy-ninth. But right at the bottom was this switchblade. I put it in my purse so I could drop it down a storm drain. The young deskcreep downstairs commenced hitting on me and I pulled the silly thing out and waved it around to scare him."

She was defiant and utterly sincere, Ken Macksey decided. Contritely, he hugged her.

"I'm sorry, this has got to me is all. Dora, we've got to tell the police." He looked at his watch. "Too much time's slipped by already."

"Uh-uh." She turned away. "I've had it with cops, Kenny. I've seen them operate, and not from your side of the fence, you know? They'll take the nearest person, the easiest answer, every time. You go ahead and ring them, but I'll be long gone."

"That's crazy—it's the one sure way to incriminate yourself."

Dora patted his cheek. "I'm incriminated now, honey. You're the heavy-hitting brain—*unincriminate* me."

Macksey peeled off his coat and sat down with a thump. "I'll take that drink you never offered." Decoding her reproachful glance, he said, "If I do something really dumb, like tampering with the scene of a crime and smuggling bodies out of here, it won't be at seven-thirty in the evening when this place is busy as Grand Central."

"There is that." Dora poured him Scotch. "I'll never forgive Mr. Jackson, coming in off the street to check out in my bedroom."

"He didn't come in off the street," Macksey corrected absently. "Not unless you put him in a fresh set of clothes, head to toe. It's been raining since lunchtime, no let-up. The man in there has dry, unmarked shoes, no topcoat, hat, or galoshes. His suit isn't even damp." Listening to himself, he blinked. "He must live right here in Flagship Tower!" Then his shoulders slumped. There were two hundred or more apartments in the building and Dora didn't know the dead man's name.

Scratch one brainstorm—getting the corpse back to its own apartment. Struck by another thought, Macksey darted back to the bedroom, returning with a bunch of keys. "Whoever went through his pockets left these."

"Big deal." Dora leaned over his shoulder.

"Look, if he does have an apartment here and we can open the

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place up, it means we might just get away with it. It's all very well in books or on TV. Dispose of the body, they say. Where, for instance? I'll look kind of conspicuous digging a grave in Central Park."

"Mr. Jackson doesn't live here—I'd have seen him around," she objected. "I told you, it was always outside, he was a *neighborhood* face."

"You're right," Macksey groaned, tossing the keys aside. "The locks here are standard, Kennard models. These are Yale-type keys. And old, discolored. Ours are still shiny, only issued last year."

Retrieving them Dora pored over them. "These are for a house, not an apartment at all. They've got a brownstone feel about them. Look, here's a long old iron one." She brushed the rabbit's-foot fob against her chin. "What does Mr. Jackson say to you, the look of him?"

"Disaster."

"No, he was a high-roller—a gambling man. Form sheets under his arm. He said something about Belmont once. It's coming back—"

"A dead maybe-gambler," Macksey pointed out heavily. "Dora, it doesn't make any difference whether he was a retired mailman or your Uncle Charlie. He's dead."

"That's dumb," said Dora. "I didn't kill him so somebody else did. The more we know about him, the more we know about the man who did it."

"Maybe. With a wound like that, internal bleeding, he didn't move far. So he was killed right out there in the corridor or in an apartment nearby." He grunted disgustedly. "Come on, Dora, find-the-real-murderer only happens on TV."

"You're such a defeatist. And you still haven't told me your sign," Dora complained.

Macksey glared at her. "Thanks to you, it'll be the sign of three-to-five for concealing a murder. Accessory, maybe. If we ever get out of this, girl, we're getting married. You're unsafe on your own."

"That's sweet, Kenny. But I think you want to save time and money by having us in one apartment instead of two, on different floors."

The young desk clerk, he of the threatened heart, had gone home. His place at the lobby desk had been taken over by Norm Callow, the night man.

Callow, uniform cap tortured into S.S. officer's rakish lines, pencil moustache feral, gave Ken Macksey a hooded look. They didn't get

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on all that well. Norm Callow was a greedy, petty opportunist and a little bit of a bully. Macksey's heart sank. If only Pops had been there instead. Pops with his rummy's nose, slovenly uniform—half of it from another building, long since razed—and helpful habit of vanishing to sleep the night away in the basement within an hour or so of arrival.

Then again, Callow *would* be on. He arrived early, left late, never called in sick, and was forever filling in for other staff—anxious for tips or, failing them, the chance to be obstructive.

"Hi," Macksey greeted him, falsely genial.

Norm Callow gave a begrudging glimpse of yellow teeth. "What's your problem, Mr. Macksey?" Always that fractional, insolent pause before a tenant's name— if he spoke at all.

Macksey lied, "No problem, Norm. The rain's eased off. I'm just going to stretch my legs." But he didn't move. "Um, later on I've got some—items of furniture to move. I'll need the key for the cargo elevator—and maybe that trolley, that'd be good." Resignedly, he placed a five-dollar bill on the counter.

Smoothing a lapel of his plum-colored tunic, Norm Callow pondered. That was why Macksey dreaded this encounter. Callow figured angles. People moved out, or shifted to larger apartments on higher floors, or smaller units near the ground. Chairs, beds, rugs, ornaments became an embarrassment. Norm Callow's sideline was snapping up these goods and selling them to other tenants as they moved in. The storage area off the boiler room could have been a thrift shop.

Anticipating the next remark, sweating slightly, Ken explained, "It's an antique rug—I've got to return it. A friend of mine's been abroad. I was sort of babysitting it."

Callow sucked a back tooth. "Antique rug, huh?" His glance was as skeptical as his tone.

Something was going on behind those sly, dusty dark eyes, and Macksey burned. No doubt Norm Callow prowled and snooped around apartments, abusing his passkey. He probably knew the decor of Macksey's three-room apartment better than the man who paid the rent—and his wages.

"Okay, Mr. Macksey," Callow said. "But I got to work the elevator for you. New rule, tied in with security and insurance and such, and no-can-do before one in the morning. I need to be out here until then. Have you got a car or pick-up or something? My Blazer's there in

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the park, three steps from the elevator. I can deliver it on my way home. Cheaper than hiring transportation or a driver."

Nothing's simple, Macksey thought. "No, thanks all the same—I've got a car." Before Callow could speak, Macksey cut in, "The loan of a car." Of course Norm Callow knew that he didn't have one of his own.

Callow proceeded to prove how irritating he could be. "Sure you have. Real tight these days, you and Miz Hooper from 30-A." He contrived to sound both bored and lewd. "Kind of a squeeze, you two and a rug in that little Jap hatchback. My Blazer'd let you lay it out straight, valuable antique rug like that."

Macksey feared that if Norm Callow sneered "antique rug" once more, he'd shake him warmly by the throat and tapdance on his miserable carcass. Then his rage was replaced by near-panic. He felt sure Callow knew everything, that he had X-ray vision penetrating the dozen or more floors above the mock crystal chandelier right into Dora's apartment, to the bedroom and that stiffening figure with a knife in its chest.

"Anything else?" Callow said. He was studying the closed-circuit TV monitors ranked behind his swivel chair.

Macksey spoke dully. Too late to change the arrangement now, risking further questions, sharper suspicion. "No, that's fine. See you later."

"I'm not cut out for this," said Macksey. Half an hour had passed, interminably. He had trudged several blocks up Second Avenue and ploddingly retraced his steps, certain that Callow was jeering him, every yard.

"It's like everyone knows, Dora. People on the street. I saw three cops, one on the corner and two in a car. I never notice them normally."

Dora, lost in her own thoughts, started, then leaned over to squeeze his clammy hand. "Kenny, you don't have to worry. I won't run away. I'll take my chances."

"It's four hours since it happened. Callow must have seen you get back from work. The police can match that against the time of death and it'll look bad. Worse." His jaw set. "Let's get to it."

Dora swallowed hard. "It's done, Kenny. I did it while you were gone. It's my mess, I shouldn't have dragged you in."

He followed the direction of her eyes and experienced a jolt. The rolled rug outside the bedroom door was obscene, a bulky sausage

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of fabric, firmly tied at both ends. Not a sausage, he thought sickly, a Christmas cracker.

"I found some dry-cleaner bags," she whispered, "wrapped him in them first."

They stared at each other for a long time.

At five past one, recovered from the nerve-wracking task of dragging the carpet to the passenger elevator, then out again the short distance to his apartment, Macksey picked up the house phone and told Norm Callow he was ready.

The burden was pathetically light. For all his portliness, "Mr. Jackson" had been a man of jockey stature. Macksey hefted the cocoon aboard Callow's trolley. "Let's go," he ordered shortly.

Smirking impartially at both Macksey and Dora, Callow rolled the load down the corridor, unlocking an inconspicuous door beside the garbage-disposal niche to reveal a dull grey-steel lattice. Yanking it back, he shoved the trolley into the freight elevator hard enough to thud against the back wall. Macksey gasped. Dora, drawn yet uncannily composed, dug him in the ribs and frowned.

"On our way," Callow announced needlessly. His whistling was a torture—worsening when he abandoned it to nag, "Last chance for the Blazer, folks. You could bust a shock, overloadin' that toy auto of yours, Miz Hooper."

She shook her head silently. The elevator jarred, halted. Fumbling at the control box, Callow mumbled, "Mind getting that thing out of here, Mr. Macksey? Got to lock this off."

Macksey grasped the trolley's crossbar handle and hauled it out into the basement parking area.

Three men converged on him, two uniformed cops and a heavy-set fellow in a tired business suit who flashed a badge. "Taylor, Lieutenant, Manhattan Central. You'll be Mr. Macksey and this is Mrs. Hooper."

"Miss Hooper," Dora amended crisply. "What is this, a bust—for throwing out an old rug?"

Taylor, weariness eloquent on the beefy face under thinning hair, nodded at the tied roll. "Mind if we look inside, lady?" From the way Taylor glanced at Norm Callow, who had strutted over to join him, Macksey divined the reason for the ambush. Maybe X-ray vision didn't come into it, but Callow *had* known.

"I could care less," Dora sniffed, "go ahead."

Callow's penknife flashed as he hacked the twine securing each

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end of the roll. Taylor yanked him back before the porter could grasp the loose edge of material.

"Slow and easy, boys. Lift it off, set it down, unroll it carefully." The uniformed men squatted and pushed delicately. Macksey couldn't look. Dora seemed unable to take her eyes off the spectacle.

Then Norm Callow gasped, starting forward, face working. Taylor laughed flatly, a scrape of iron on cement. Wonderingly, Macksey peeked past him.

A lunatic jumble lay on the opened rug—cushions, a steam iron, the concrete frog-on-toadstool statuette from Dora's balcony, the weights she used for working out, and a cast-iron doorstop.

"Well, now," Taylor observed inadequately. Color had rushed up past his tight, wilting collar. "Nice gag, people. Only you should have waited for Halloween or April Fools' Day. This isn't funny."

Callow, cap off and wiping his forehead, cringed. "I gave you the tip in good faith! Hell, it's a trick. I told you, she's been sweet-talking old Gus Brothers for weeks—no better'n a hooker. The management told me to keep an eye on her.

"Gus snuck up there about six tonight and I snuck up after him. I could hear a ruckus in her apartment. Then her fancy-man, guilt all over his face, wants to move something out in the middle of the night. Go on up to her place and search it—you'll see! Gus went up and he hasn't come down."

The older uniformed cop demanded, "Gus Brothers who used to run those floating crap games on the West Side? I thought he was dead."

"Maybe he is," said Taylor. "Miss Hooper, do you know Gus Brothers?"

"Not by name," she replied demurely. "Normie here knows him real well, though. It's come back to me. You look different without that Hitler cap, Normie. But it was you with Mr. Jackson from Jersey in the pocket park that day. He gave you some money and you were bad-mouthing him, and then you spotted me and scuttled off."

"Lying bitch!" the porter howled. "Lieutenant, break her door down and find him. She stabbed him, she's just trying to muddy things up. Ask anyone. She took after Allie Mills, the day man, with a blade—like to slit his throat open if she hadn't been dragged off."

Lieutenant Porter had the fractious air of a man who has lost his place. "Who's this Jackson from Jersey?"

The older cop said, "Gus Brothers had crap games in apartment

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houses all over the West Side. I thought he went to Florida while Nixon was still President."

Norm Callow, his eyes shadowed by the sharply raked brim of his cap, started to speak, choked, and went pale.

Dora said, "Mr. Jackson from Jersey is Gus Brothers, Lieutenant. I'll explain that later on." She turned to Macksey. "Kenny, what's that word again?"

"Hypothetical," Macksey supplied.

"Hypothetically, Lieutenant, if Gus Brothers *is* dead, in my apartment for instance, and if Normie only listened outside and couldn't see in, what makes him so sure Mr. Jackson is dead?"

Norm Callow broke, bolting for the cargo elevator. The older cop, still mulling over Gus Brothers' floating crap games, shouted and Lieutenant Taylor made a grab at the fugitive. But it was Dora who tripped him and Macksey who sat on the small of the writhing killer's back.

Dawn was coming up when Lieutenant Taylor glowered at them and said, "You're crazy-lucky, you know that? Obstructing an investigation, suppressing evidence, failing to report a crime. Miss Hooper here is from the Planet Marigold in my book. No offense, dear, you're an obvious fruitloop from way back. But you, Macksey—a CPA." He shook his head gloomily. "My son's going to be a CPA."

Dora was meek. "If you'd been me, you'd have got scared and tried to get off the hook."

"I'm not you," he growled. A slow smile spread on his jowly face. "Man should count his blessings, huh?"

"You like me a little bit all the same," Dora coaxed.

Lieutenant Taylor shied and glared hard enough to produce a squint. "Now quit that!

"All right," he went on, "this thing was about gambling and money. Gus Brothers made a comeback with his crap game and Callow was his partner. Flagship Tower was a good location. Players could come and go all night while Callow was on duty and it didn't look strange. But he eventually wanted a bigger cut, so Brothers decided to retire all over again."

The detective turned sardonic. "Your Mr. Jackson from Jersey had a mean streak, Miss Hooper. He tried blackmail before taking off for Florida. If Norm Callow didn't cough up, Brothers would

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anonymously blow the whistle to the building management and maybe us.

"Callow spent Wednesdays in the basement fixing up scrounged furniture, and Gus Brothers knew where to find him for a private talk. They argued for hours, then Callow had to go upstairs and cover for the day man until five P.M. After which he rejoined Brothers, tempers flared again, and they fought—to the death, as it turned out."

"If the fight was in the basement," Dora asked, "how come Mr. Jackson wound up in my room?"

"Callow needed to frame somebody and you were ideal. He had seen you with Brothers. He got him upstairs in the freight elevator from the basement, waited for the corridor to be clear, and wrestled him along to 30-A. It meant getting blood on himself, but short-term that was no problem—it hardly showed up on his purple-maroon uniform and he could clean it off straight after.

"Poor old Gus was dying fast, literally on his last legs. Callow propped him against your door, pressed the buzzer, and beat it." Breaking off, Lieutenant Taylor grunted meditatively.

"I take it back about the Planet Marigold, Miss Hooper. If you'd acted like a responsible, sane citizen, you'd have been the prime suspect and Callow might have got off. Fooling him into expecting the corpse and tipping us off about it, then pulling that switch to knock him flat on his butt was nearly brilliant."

Waiting for a cab outside the precinct house, Macksey was in a volcanically bad mood, wreathed in emotional steam.

Dora sidled closer, smiling timidly. "Kenny, lighten up. There wasn't any brilliant switch and I never guessed Normie Callow killed Mr. Jackson. Not until he made that slip when they jumped us by the elevator. But it was kind of fun, letting Lieutenant Taylor think a fruitloop was smarter than him."

"Hah!" he contradicted bitterly. "It was a charade—you used me."

"I *couldn't* use you, dummy. That's how the brilliant switch happened. As soon as you went down to talk to Callow, I commenced thinking how selfish I was—how you'd be caught and ruined, all for being a nice guy who tolerates my craziness. But you're so stubborn you wouldn't have pulled out. So I left Mr. Jackson on the bed and put all that heavy stuff in the rug. That way you'd think you were helping and it didn't matter if you were caught dumping it."

Macksey was swept by regret and tenderness. "Sorry, sweetheart.

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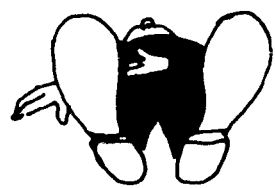
Now can we get married?" But then he frowned and asked a different question.

"Supposing we hadn't been stopped and I'd just dumped that rug somewhere? It still left you with a dead man in your apartment, even if I was in the clear. How did you plan to handle that?"

Dora snuggled up to him, slipping an arm around his waist. She sounded surprised and fondly patronizing. "I'd have thought of something, honey."

Macksey didn't doubt it for an instant.



DETECTIVERSE

DROP OVER ANY TIME

by CARRIE HICKMAN

His enemy knew
He had spying to do,
So made him a trap of his car.
When he drove by the cliff,
He said, "Ho—brakes are stiff!"
But *he* was soon stiffer, by far.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

If one divided protagonists in our field who have been featured in extended series (five or more book appearances) into private detectives, police, amateurs, spies, criminals, and adventurers, nearly a quarter would be private investigators. (Over a third have been police characters, and amateur sleuths trail private shamuses by a slim margin.) One of the most controversial of current private eyes is Robert B. Parker's Spenser. Some—including me—have strongly regretted Spenser's descent to the status of killing machine and have found his continuing fixation (this seems a more accurate term than love) for Susan Silverman less fascinating than Parker evidently does.

Spenser returns for the twelfth time in *A Catskill Eagle* (Delacorte, $14.95), and perhaps I'm becoming adjusted to some of the peculiarities of this series. At least here the killings have some larger motive than pure Spenserian pleasure. Silverman, feeling constrained by their relationship, fled from Boston to California one or two books back. In *Eagle* she has become entangled in the Costigan family and asks Hawk, Spenser's good killing buddy, for help. Hawk is set up, lands in jail, Spenser breaks him out, and so the cross-country carnage begins, with our "heroes" ultimately serving as hired guns for the feds. I have some difficulty thinking of Spenser and Hawk as good guys, but Parker tells a driving, churning tale, full of tension, menace, and flashes of wit and telling expression.

Some of the best pure adventure I've read has been in the Modesty Blaise series by Peter O'Donnell, which was abandoned by its original U.S. publisher and has now been taken up by Mysterious Press. *Last Day in Limbo* ($14.95), published in England in 1976, is prime vintage Modesty, with non-stop action and irresistible suspense. Paxero is a Guatemala businessman, owner of a plantation in the steamy interior run by his demented Aunt Benita. So difficult to get good plantation workers these days, but by one means or another Paxero manages to get the folks Benita wants. Like an old friend of Modesty's, thought dead these three years. Then Paxero comes to the attention of Modesty and her colleague Willie Garvin . . .

A greater contrast to the above than *Sion Crossing* by Anthony Price (Mysterious Press, $15.95) can hardly be imagined. Aside from a half dozen pages late in the book, this is continuous inaction, continuous dialogue so oblique as to require high reader attention. Perhaps these international intrigue tales about Dr. David Audley are an acquired taste; if so, I've acquired it. Whyever should an American senator want Audley to

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research a Civil War treasure in Sion Crossing, Georgia? And, failing Audley, take his colleague, ambitious and innocent of field experience? It must be a game, but whose, and to what end, and how could something so tranquil as historical inquiry turn deadly? Fascination of the cerebral sort here, with Price's usual care with language.

I can't much relate to Sara Paretsky's Chicago private eye, V. I. Warshawski: she espouses three positions morally offensive to me. But fortunately these have little to do with the story in her third appearance, *Killing Orders* (Morrow, $15.95), which is very well told, with an intriguing plot and strong casting. Bonds owned by a Dominican Priory prove to be forgeries, and V.I.'s aunt asks her to investigate. Then the aunt, who hates V.I.'s deceased mother with a diseased passion and V.I. as well, changes her mind. But V.I., still interested, is threatened with acid, then attacked. What are the deadly connections among a bunch of apparently innocuous Chicago priests, mayhem, the Mafia, unfriendly corporate takeovers, and a secret investment society?

The Deaf Man returns to plague the 87th Precinct in *Eight Black Horses* by Ed McBain (Arbor House, $15.95). This particular villain, you may recall, likes to tease cops with clues to his planned capers and challenge them to stop him. Here a corpse in a park is followed by a series of pictorial messages to the precinct, all designed to lead up to some grand celebration the Deaf Man has in mind for New Year's. A celebration, one might expect, with maximum profit for the Deaf Man and maximum spillage of cop blood. An interesting story, more straightforwardly plotted than many in the series and with a little more pandering to presumed prurient reader interests.

A movie company descends on an English country house in E. X. Giroux's *A Death for a Darling* (St. Martin's, $13.95). Also in attendance, when he'd rather be elsewhere, is barrister Robert Forsyth, who debuted in Giroux's masterful *A Death for Adonis* (1984). Star of the company is Mickey Dowling, whose good looks are only equalled by his insensitivity, cowardice, selfishness, and inability to act. Despite Dowling's handicaps, however, Erika Von Farr, a superbly beautiful woman who can act, is about to marry him, and her aunt, who owns the country estate, offers it to them as a wedding present. Dowling normally demonstrates the innate ability to breed hatred like rabbits wherever he goes, so the rest of the film company teeters regularly on the edge of homicide. A curious and charged household, then—and, more curiously, Dowling isn't the expected murder victim. A competent killer, almost too wily for Forsyth, is at work. Very nicely told.

England's Martin Russell specializes in baffling plots (perhaps he's heir apparent to his countryman L. P. Davies in this), and in *The Search for Sara* (Walker, $12.95) he ties up the ends of his puzzle even more neatly than I ex-

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pected. One Saturday morning Ralph Brent's wife puts a roast in the oven and announces she's going for a walk. The roast incinerates and Sara Brent does not return. Ralph and his teenage daughters are distraught and call the police, who ask for a photograph of Sara to aid in tracing her. The girls find one, but Ralph says the woman in the picture is not his wife. The fact that Ralph is dallying with two women outside the marriage bed and now fails to identify a likeness that everyone else says is his wife's does not endear him to the police. Suspicion, terminal suspicion, descends.

Donald Seaman satisfyingly mines the ever-rich espionage vein called "find the mole" in *The Wilderness of Mirrors* (St. Martin's, $15.95). The British scheme to snatch a top Russian scientist when he's part of a Soviet team visiting Geneva. The caper falls fatally and publicly apart, ending the career of the head of British Intelligence. His successor finds that the Geneva plan was leaked to the Reds: a traitor sits among the elite atop the intelligence apparatus. At the same time, a former mole, who betrayed dozens and leaked secrets like a sieve decades earlier before decamping to Moscow, surfaces in the Far East. Seaman brings these threads together quite capably, leaving a nice touch of uncertainty at the end.

Keith Heller, born in Minnesota, living in Spain, teacher at universities here and abroad, offers the first of a series in *Man's Illegal Life* (Scribners, $12.95). Before London police and detectives, before Bow Street Runners, came parish watchmen. George Man, in 1722, is one of them. More intelligent than most, he treads the dark streets, searching for the reason and agent of death for Geoffrey Stannard, found bound and starved in his boarded-up house in the manner once used on plague sufferers. The desperate poverty and danger of the London of that time live well in Heller's story.

Another of the invaluable reference works that bless our field has been reissued in a second edition: *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers,* edited by John M. Reilly (St. Martin's, $69.95). Critical essays and wide-ranging bibliographic data are here provided on some 640 writers, of whom 109 are new in this edition (with 78 dropped from the first edition), and 23 essays are completely rewritten. The result is excellent, with better coverage and higher critical reliability than the good standard of the first version. No crime fiction reference shelf is complete without this.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

The porch light snapped on and Cody came down the concrete steps to join them. She was wearing a short black dressing gown with a monkish hood over her head. Sterling was reminded of a boxer entering the ring . . .

FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Peter Sterling strode into the reception area and extended a long arm to Gus Hobbs, grasping his hand and drawing him up out of the chair as if he were a survivor floating beside a rescue boat. Thank goodness Gus looked better than he had sounded yesterday on the telephone. This was old Gus a few pounds heavier, beaver teeth half concealed by the twisted smile, a scud of silver now in the close-cut black hair, squinting eyes still alive with self-deprecating intelligence.

"I'm early," Gus said. "Hope it's all right."

"Couldn't be too early for me. Come on in, Gus. How many years has it been?"

Safely inside the corner office, Sterling refused to sit behind his desk but took a chair opposite his friend across the coffee table. Outside the wall of windows, Montreal displayed its grid of important buildings, all lit up and busy, the streets swarming with people who had things to do. Sterling could see the roof of the building housing the A&K Agency, where he and Gus had worked as copywriters in the good old days. Now, twenty years later and five blocks away, he was installed as creative director of Intermark, and Gus Hobbs—what was he up to these days?

"Freelancing, Pete." There it was, the terrible euphemism of the

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45-year-old no longer able to hold down a job. "I thought I'd come in and describe to you the service I can offer you and your clients."

Sterling's stomach went queasy, his toes clamped down on slippery insoles. Gus was actually going to deliver a pitch to him. This was rehearsed material, the sort of thing you wrote out in manuals for salesmen to work from. He didn't want to hear it, not from Gus. He and old Gus used to pour scorn on this sort of thing. Where was the irreverence, where were the laughs?

"As we both know," Gus was going on, "work in advertising agencies comes in an irregular flow. You sit around for days with nothing to do, then suddenly you're hit with more than you can handle. I'm sure you face that now just as we did together back at A&K."

Sterling grinned and nodded, engulfing his old friend with 110 percent of his attention, but he was telling himself that Gus didn't have to remind him about their golden days. Gus had been the eternal breath of fresh air—the originality of his humor was brilliant. Sterling would be at his A&K desk in the late afternoon when he would sense a presence in the office doorway. Looking up, he would see Gus Hobbs standing there, shoulders sloping, arms limp, a bovine expression on his face, and around his head a wire coat-hanger stretched to clamp under the chin, the hook poised above like a zany question mark. "Pete," he would say in a lugubrious, nasal tone of voice, "it's almost five o'clock and you don't have your coat-hanger on yet."

There was only one thing to be done. Sterling would get up, holding in the hurting laughter, and would go to his halltree, take down his coat-hanger, stretch it to shape, and put it on his head. Moments later, they were in the art director's doorway, the two of them like robots out of a sci-fi film. "Eddie, it's five o'clock and you don't have your coat-hanger on yet."

"You crazy bastards."

Now here was Hobbs with his eyes full of panic and something else that might have been anger, trying to sell Sterling a writing service that the creative director did not need. When his friend was finished, Sterling said, "It goes without saying, Gus, you could write any campaign this agency might require with one brain tied behind your back. But the problem is—I have a full staff. Management is after me to spend less in this department, not more. If I told them I was going to farm out work and pay a freelance his fee, they'd say use the people we're already paying."

Gus accepted total defeat instantly and with obvious relief. He

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relaxed and became a little more like the old Gus, but with a breath of melancholy, as if he had been swallowing too much rejection. "I knew this would be your situation, it's the same everywhere. But Cody thought I should come in and see you anyway. For old time's sake."

"How is Cody anyway?" The only news of Hobbs' wife Sterling would have welcomed was her latest address in Kuala Lumpur. In the early years, before his own marriage to Martha, Sterling had attended many a party at the house in Beaconsfield on the lakeshore, had been introduced to eligible female friends of Cody, had slept over. The times were always merry, distorted with alcohol, warmed by the intensity of his almost brotherly relationship with Gus.

"Cody is okay," Gus said. "Still clipping the coupons."

The fact that his wife had money of her own had never been concealed by Gus Hobbs. He made a joke of it. His own tendency to be a spendthrift saw him, back in the A&K days, delivering his affairs into her hands. Cody claimed her husband's paychecks and sent him to work each day with only enough money for a pack of cigarettes, a modest lunch, and one pint of beer. Sterling remembered that lovely Friday when Gus won the office payday lottery, pocketing an unexpected sixty dollars. Those people who knew Cody Hobbs were sworn to secrecy and Gus rolled about the agency for the next week brimming with beer in the afternoons and going for drinks before catching a later train.

"I'm lucky," Gus concluded. "A lot of guys on the street have nothing to fall back on."

It was true, Gus would always have a roof over his head and food on the table whether he worked or not. But Sterling knew there was more to it than that. Pride entered into the equation. Self-respect demanded that Hobbs bring home some money—and that he be seen to do so.

"Can you come for a drink?" Gus asked. He had a funny, formal way of cocking his wrist and looking at his watch.

"I can, in fact," Sterling said, enjoying the outflow of tension now that the ugly formalities were finished. "Martha is in Toronto providing moral support to an old friend who's just split from her husband." He collected files of material he would be presenting at a client meeting tomorrow afternoon and loaded them into his briefcase. Then he shrugged into his jacket and ushered Gus into the corridor.

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Lew Hagerty was at his drawing-board in the cubicle next door. "Hoist one for me," he said.

"Can you come along?" Sterling invited the art director. "This is my old buddy, Gus Hobbs—we were together at A&K."

"Hello, Gus Hobbs." Hagerty shook hands. "Wish I could but you'll need these layouts for your meeting tomorrow."

The friends went to the Stanley Tavern where they used to drink in the old days, enjoying the walk along Maisonneuve Boulevard. Everybody on the street seemed happy, perhaps because of the absence of any threat of rain. There were cars full of people going home, not bothered by the sluggish traffic, and there were squads of pedestrians off the leash and making for bars or restaurants or movie houses.

"Remember we used to say cover the table with beer?" Sterling said. They were tucked into the receiving arms of comfortable chairs, each man equipped with four foaming glasses of draft.

"Remember Friday afternoons?" Gus said, setting down his first glass, empty. "We used to open the bottle of gin and sit there in your office watching the sun go down behind the Goodyear Rubber sign."

"Remember old Bob Seymour, dapper Bob?"

"Always prim and proper in his pressed slacks and those neat rimless glasses and his pipe between his teeth at the proper angle."

"And he wandered into the office and we didn't want to offer him a drink so you slid the bottle behind that stack of layouts."

Sterling was starting to laugh. "So Bob walked away down the corridor with that dignified strut and we saw he had a square of toilet paper stuck to the heel of his shoe."

Customers came and went in the busy tavern and the two old friends sat close up against their table, demolishing successive orders of beer. The door was propped open, letting in humid evening air and the clash and clump of street noise. "How is Martha?" Gus asked.

"Fine. I told you she's away in Toronto for a few days. She doesn't have enough to do. The kids are grown up and able to look after themselves. The two of us drove to New Orleans last February. She wants us to move there."

"Big decision at your age."

"I know. But jazz from open doorways in the middle of the afternoon." Sterling felt important things were being said.

"Cody was glad to be rid of Jennifer."

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Sterling had not heard the name of Gus's daughter in years. He said it now as if she was regularly on his mind. "How is Jennifer?"

"Ran away twice and we got her back. Second time with her hair cut and colored. I knew she had no intention of remaining with us. When she turned eighteen, she thumbed to Vancouver. I guess she's there now, unless she's gone on down the coast."

It was time to decide about food. "Come on out to the house and eat with us." Gus made a telephone call and came back looking relieved. "Cody says don't let the grass-widower get away."

They wandered down to Windsor Station and caught a commuter train to Beaconsfield. The house, which Sterling had not seen in twenty years, was a ten-minute walk from the station. The neighborhood was changed—the Hobbs house, which had stood alone among trees and grass near a crooked gravel road, was now part of a suburb of established bungalows. It looked out of place to Sterling, an aging frame structure surrounded by confident houses of brick and stone.

Cody was standing in the doorway as the men approached. Gus stopped to snatch at a piece of trash blown onto the parched lawn; Sterling faced her alone. She was precise in pencil skirt and blouse buttoned to the chin, slender legs poised in expensive shoes with very high heels which could not disguise the fact that she was unnaturally short. Her pointed face had not put on an ounce in all that time, uneven lips bent in a quirky smile, triangular eyes flickering up at Sterling with malign intensity. She had clearly been told on the telephone that the old buddy had no work to offer.

"Peter—why such a stranger?"

"Hello, Cody. You haven't changed."

They dined by candlelight at a tiny table beside a narrow window framing an apple tree with many dead limbs. The array of gleaming silver was appropriate to a state dinner but their knees kept touching under the crowded surface. Conversation was organized by Cody and served in courses as part of the meal. Laughter was pronounced like a litany chant.

Over coffee and brandy, she said, "A shame you two can't work together again. For old time's sake."

"I've explained it all to Gus." Sterling performed a brief reprise, his staff of underemployed writers, the pressure from management to keep expenditures down.

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"Still, it seems wrong to me. You and Gus go back a long way. Company policy should not apply."

Sterling glanced at Gus, who gave him a sheepish smile. On a deep level penetrated by the booze, he knew his friend's wife was far from wrong. Gus was in trouble and if Sterling would not help him, who could? But tomorrow he would be sober with all the protective layers in place. "I wish it could be some other way," he said.

"It can." Cody cleared a place in front of her as if she were about to arrange salt and pepper and sugar and cream into the battle of Balaclava. She folded her arms and leaned forward onto her elbows. "I thought about it earlier. Peter, have you got an important meeting coming up? One where you have to present creative material to a client? Something only you can handle?"

He thought of the files in his briefcase, the layouts being finished by Lew Hagerty. "I have, in fact. Tomorrow afternoon at three."

"Couldn't be better. Why don't you sleep here tonight? I insist you do that, anyway—no need for you to go home to an empty house. In the morning, lateish, you can ring the office and say you can't get in. Call it a bad back."

"They'd only postpone the meeting," Gus said.

"Not in this case." Sterling liked the sound of what Cody was saying. He was ahead of her. "This client hates to be messed around at the last minute."

"Good," Cody said. "So tonight and tomorrow, you brief Gus on what he needs to know to present the campaign."

"I have it all in my briefcase."

"When you ring in sick, tell them you're sending a proxy, this very experienced man, Gus Hobbs. Gus will shine, I'm sure of that. Then in the weeks ahead, when you farm out work to the same man, your principals will be grateful to him. They can't disapprove."

Gus was less confident. "Won't they want somebody from the office to present instead of a stranger? Somebody on the account?"

"Not this one," Sterling said. "The people who did the ads are good creatively but terrible in a meeting. And the account executive is a message boy. The client marketing manager can tie him in knots."

"What'll he do to me?"

"He'll be impressed by your wisdom and charm," Sterling said, going for his briefcase. "Let's get to work."

The worst part of the deal was being alone in the house with Cody Hobbs after Gus had gone to the office at half past ten. Sterling was

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dismayed by the gloomy silence that came down after Gus had driven out of the lane and down the road. He had never got on with this intense little woman—what was he going to say to her all day?

"Listen, Cody, I think I'll wander on down to the station and get a train in to town. Go home."

"Not a good idea. Somebody from your office might see you." Cody had taken up scissors and was giving the potted plants haircuts. "Besides, Gus will be telling everybody you're on your back out here at his place. That's the scenario, that's how he was available to take over your meeting."

They watched late-morning television, the fourth rerun of an ancient situation comedy, one of the actors dead last year. Sterling stared at the energetic performance, trying to catch some sign that the man knew his time was running out. No, he behaved just like Sterling and everybody else—as if he would be going on forever.

"I wish Gus would telephone," Cody said around noon. "I feel like ringing him."

"Better not. He'll be rehearsing the pitch with the rest of the group."

The sun came out and Sterling took himself into the back garden. The lawn hadn't been watered for a long time, the hose lying in a hopeless twist under the reel that was meant to hold it neatly. Even the weeds were dead of neglect. Give Gus another year in this place and Montreal would have half an acre of Kalihari Desert on the lakeshore. They could sell tickets.

Years ago, pre-Martha, Sterling had sunbathed and picnicked here, brought out to meet a female friend of Cody's, a girl with poodle-cut hair who came from one of the big houses nearer the lake. They got through two large bottles of gin that day. Gus ran the barbecue with careless expertise and Cody brought baby Jennifer outside to crawl over the lush grass. Sterling came back after walking the girl home and slept on a mattress under the open sky, pleased with how drunk he was and determined to stay awake, not to waste the glory of the stars.

Now he wandered inside and told Cody, "I think I'll lie down for a brief nap." The idea was to kill some of the time until Gus came home.

"Good idea. But have some lunch first. I've made mulligatawny."

He put his face over the pot of soup, inhaled the spicy smell of curry. "Mmmm. I'll put away a bowl of that."

The soup had a terrific afterburn, which was okay with Sterling,

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who took at least one meal a week in an Indian restaurant. He pounded it down with wedges of whole-wheat bread and swallows of cold beer.

"I've turned down the bed in the guest room," Cody said as she cleared away.

"Good." Sterling headed for the stairs. "I will lay me down and bleed a while," he said, "and then rise up and fight again."

She laughed for the first time that day or last night. "It's good to have you back in the house, Peter."

Sterling lay on top of the blankets, the unfamiliar pillow fat and unyielding under his head. He scanned the ceiling and saw patches of damp as well as a really bad crack in one corner. Time was when old Gus, like the rest of them, was a demon with the aquaseal and the polyfilla—many of their A&K lunch hours were spent in hardware departments reading labels on new home-maintenance products. Obviously, not any more. This place was about to split in half and sink into the tarn.

Sterling slept. When he woke up and moved, his gut flared as if somebody had thrust in a hot knife. Wonderful. Now he was going to be sick on Cody's cooking. He waited for the cramp to pass but it didn't. He rolled off the bed and managed to get his feet under him, but straightening up was torture. And he staggered, having to catch himself with a hand against the wall.

A visit to the bathroom brought no improvement. When he came out, he stood at the top of the stairs, weaving. "Cody?" His voice was the whine of a sick child.

Her face popped into view in the opening at the foot of the stairs like a puppet in a Punch and Judy show. "Sleep well?"

"I've got a problem. Indigestion. Got anything I can take?"

"Poor thing. You go and lie down, I'll bring you something."

She came to him, carrying a strip of foil from which she pressed a couple of white tablets. "Let these dissolve in your mouth. Gus swears by them when his tummy acts up." She drew a blanket over him. "Don't get a chill. I feel terrible, it's my fault, I fed you the mulligatawny."

"No, I loved it. Maybe I've picked up a summer bug."

He closed his eyes and began timing the rhythm of the spasms, drifting into a fog of pain. He must have fallen asleep again because suddenly Gus was in the room standing over him. "What's with you, old timer? I need you for the celebration."

"It went well?"

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"Fantastic. Your client bought the campaign on the spot. They cracked a bottle in the managing director's office at four o'clock."

"You must have done well, Gus."

"Quality of the material, Pete. And your good briefing. Anybody could have done it."

"But you did it."

Cody came into the room with a thermometer in her hand. "Was I right or was I right?" she crowed. "Gus is persona grata at Intermark as of now." She thrust the thermometer between Sterling's teeth. "Hold this under your tongue. There's a lot of summer flu going around. If you've got a fever, that's what it is."

He did have a fever. She nodded as she read the thermometer, shaking it down, dropping it into its plastic case and into her apron pocket. "No wonder you feel terrible," she said. "We'll have to get some aspirin into you. Lots of aspirin. And a hot drink with rum and lemon."

Looking worried, Gus followed her out of the room. She reached back and closed the door. Sterling heard their steps descending the stairs. He closed his eyes and bit down against the waves of pain.

The voices downstairs began to sound contentious. Gus's, more than Cody's, rose in argument. She responded with the steady beat of authority. Gus seemed to be losing the debate—he said less and less, at last fell silent.

Sterling realized he was slipping in and out of consciousness when he opened his eyes and saw Cody standing over him holding a mug that was issuing steam. "Wakey, wakey," she said. "Here's your healing grog."

"I'm not sure I can swallow."

"You sit up now. Here, let me get the pillow behind you."

"That's agony, Cody."

"Drink it down—a cup of kindness for old time's sake."

The drink was hot but his lips seemed not to feel the heat. He inhaled rather than tasted the pungency of rum. When it was all down him, she said, "Good boy." She helped him lie flat. "Now you sleep. We won't bother getting you out of your clothes."

Again he slept, and awoke feeling worse than ever. The cramps had not subsided—they were more frequent and more intense. He opened his eyes and found the room without much light in it. Panic suddenly welled up in him to overflowing. He was alone with these people, sicker than a dog, and Martha was away in Toronto, not even aware of what was happening to him. He needed Martha.

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"Cody! Gus!"

The door swung open and a light was switched on. Gus was holding a newspaper open to the television listings. Cody followed him into the room. "What is it?"

"I'm not feeling any better. I want to tell Martha what's happening."

"She's in Toronto," Gus said.

"I know her friend's telephone." He said the number. "Ask her to come back, first flight."

"I'll go and do that now," Cody said. She left the room.

Gus sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm so sorry, old buddy." He looked at the floor.

"It's like hot pokers. I've *never* been sick like this."

Cody came back. "I spoke to Martha," she said. "There's a flight early in the morning. She'll be here before noon."

"Noon," Sterling moaned. "I'm trying to get through the next five minutes."

Cody told him the best thing for him was sleep and they left him with the light out and the door ajar. He closed his eyes and when he opened them again there was no light from the corridor. They must have gone to bed. Sterling knew he was hallucinating when he saw a 3A streetcar rolling in through the window. Impossible—the streetcars had all been taken off when they opened the subway. A horse looked in at the doorway, began to trot with a jingling sound of sleighbells. Young Pete Sterling ran after the milkman's sleigh, climbed aboard, and was dragged along the rutted, snow-banked street. He could smell the sweet sweat of the horse.

The smell turned sour. He raised his head. God help him, he had vomited on Cody's bedspread! He had died and gone to hell! Getting out of bed was too much trouble—unless somebody came to help him, he was going to have to lie in his own mess.

The light in the hall came on. The door opening widened and Gus crept into the room like a thief in the night.

"You awake, Pete?"

"Gus, I was sick. I'm sorry—"

"Listen, she's poisoned you. Cody gave you something in the soup and more in the toddy. I can't go along with it."

"What are you saying?"

"Shhh. She mustn't hear us. She made me agree to go along, but I can't. I think she's crazy. She's obsessed with me getting a job at Intermark."

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"Poison?"

"I'm taking you out of here and to the hospital. But we can't implicate Cody, okay? We'll say you swallowed something accidentally. Come on, let's get you up."

Gus raised his friend from the soiled bed and guided him downstairs to the kitchen. He soaked a towel in warm water and wiped his face clean and sponged the mess from his shoulder. "That'll do. Come on."

In the front hall, Gus propped Sterling against a wall and began searching tables and shelves. "I can't find the car keys. Maybe I left them in the ignition."

The night air was cool and fresh. As he was dragged toward the car, Sterling took deep breaths and forced them down against the knotted agony. He rested against a fender while Gus checked the ignition lock. "Not here," he whispered. "Hell, I think I know what's happened."

As if to confirm his suspicion, the porch light snapped on and Cody came down the concrete steps to join them. "What's going on?" She was wearing a short black dressing gown with a monkish hood over her head. Sterling was reminded of a boxer entering the ring.

"He needs a doctor."

"You've got to leave him here, Gus. We've started, we have to finish."

"*You've* started."

"On your behalf." She bucked her head back and the hood fell away—her face was ashen in the light. "If the police come into this now, what happens? Think. How would you cope with me put away? You wouldn't last a month."

"He'll die if he doesn't get help."

"Keep out of it. You'll end up with a terrific job at Intermark. You've got one foot in the door right now."

The telephone rang. Together, Gus and Cody hurried Sterling back inside. Gus broke away first and took up the receiver. "Hello? Martha, am I glad it's you. Where are you? Yes, he's here. I'll let you speak to him."

Sterling sank onto a chair and accepted the telephone. "When did you get back?"

"Half an hour ago. I took a late flight. You sound terrible."

"How did you find me?"

"When I saw you weren't here, I phoned around. I tried Lew Hag-

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erty and he said he'd seen you leave the office with somebody named Gus. That was all I needed to know."

"Martha, I'm sick. It's bad." A lot went on in Sterling's mind as he stared at Gus and Cody. His old friend *did* depend on his wife. To start proving intent to kill would be tricky. All he wanted was out of this mess. "It must be something I ate," he said. "We're going now to the hospital to get me pumped out." He raised his eyebrows at Gus.

"Lakeshore General," Gus said. Cody took car keys from her pocket and handed them to her husband as she turned away.

"Lakeshore General."

"I'll be there in under an hour. Are you all right?"

"*Now* I'm all right," Sterling said.

Someday, Sterling said to himself as he recuperated at home, he might tell Martha about Cody's attempt to do him in, but not yet. Martha's anger would be massive and she might blow the whistle on Cody without considering what would happen to Gus without a wife. The weather came nice again after a few days of rain, so as he left home to catch his bus downtown Martha was able to say, "All you missed was the monsoon."

Sterling had been keeping in touch by telephone, so he knew that Gus Hobbs had been brought in and installed in a spare office to help with the load while the creative director was absent. According to the comments he heard from the account group that morning, Sterling gathered that old Gus was fitting in just fine. So something good had come out of the nasty affair—he and his buddy would be together again.

Gus was in a meeting when Sterling got in, and not released from it until half past eleven. At that time, Sterling wandered in and eased a haunch onto the window-ledge. "I'm your boss," he said. "I thought we should go to lunch and try and get to know each other."

"I hear you're a proper bastard," Gus said absently.

"Only till you get close to me. Then I become a tyrant." Sterling focused across his coffee mug—there was no missing the worried frown on Gus's face. "Cheer up, old friend. You're in out of the cold."

"I've got a problem, Pete. You're going to have to help me."

"Again? What is it this time?"

"After we left you and Martha at the hospital the other night and came back home, Cody and I got into an argument. I turned on her and beat her to death."

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"You're joking, Gus."

"No, really. I swung at her with a brass jug and caught her above the ear. She went down and I was so afraid of what she'd say to me when she woke up that I kept on hitting her."

"Good Lord."

"She's buried in a shallow grave in the back yard. Trouble is, turning the earth and putting her in seems to have made things grow. The grave looks obvious as hell. So I'm going to have to do the whole yard. And I need help."

Gus Hobbs was emerging in a new light. The man had killed his wife—but his problem, to hear him tell it, was one of landscaping.

"You're asking me to come and dig your yard?"

"Unless you have a better idea."

Sterling went back to his office and sat looking at the telephone for quite a while before he picked it up and began dialing the police. And as he did so, he was surprised to find himself feeling a few shreds of sympathy for poor old Cody.

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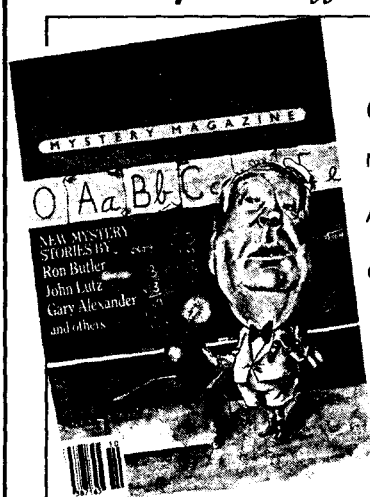

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a distinguished reprint by

ELIZABETH TAYLOR

Elizabeth Taylor, called by Arthur Mizener "the modern man's Jane Austin," has published a great deal of well received fiction since her first novel At Mrs. Lippincott's *in 1946. Her short stories have appeared in* The New Yorker, McCall's, Harper's Bazaar, *and other major magazines. "The Flypaper" was first published in* Cornhill *and was dramatized on the TV anthology series* Tales of the Unexpected, *with Lorna Yabsley in the role of the docile schoolgirl . . .*

THE FLYPAPER

by ELIZABETH TAYLOR

On Wednesdays, after school, Sylvia took the bus to the outskirts of the nearest town for her music lesson. Because of her docile manner, she did not complain of the misery she suffered in Miss Harrison's darkened parlor, sitting at the old-fashioned upright piano with its brass candlesticks and loose, yellowed keys. In the highest register there was not the faintest tinkle of a note, only the hollow sound of the key being banged down. Although that distant octave was out of her range, Sylvia sometimes pressed down one of its notes, listening mutely to Miss Harrison's exasperated railings about her—Sylvia's—lack of aptitude, or even concentration. The room was darkened in winter by a large fir tree pressing against—in windy weather tapping against—the window, and in summer by holland blinds, half drawn to preserve the threadbare carpet. To add to all the other miseries, Sylvia had to peer shortsightedly at the music-book, her glance going up and down between it and the keyboard, losing her place, looking hunted, her lips pursed.

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It was now the season of the drawn blinds, and she waited in the lane at the bus-stop, feeling hot in her winter coat, which her grandmother insisted on her wearing, just as she insisted on the music lessons. The lane buzzed in the heat of the late afternoon—with bees in the clover, and flies going crazy over some cow-pats in the road.

Since her mother's death, Sylvia had grown glum and sullen. She was a plain child, plump, mature for her eleven years. Her greasy hair was fastened back by a pink plastic slide; her tweed coat, of which, last winter, she had been rather proud, had cuffs and collar of mock ocelot. She carried, besides her music case, a shabby handbag, once her mother's.

The bus seemed to tremble and jingle as it came slowly down the road. She climbed on, and sat down on the long seat inside the door, where a little air might reach her.

On the other long seat opposite her was a very tall man; quite old, she supposed, for his hair was carefully arranged over his bald skull. He stared at her. She puffed with the heat and then, to avoid his glance, she slewed round a little to look over her shoulder at the dusty hedges—the leaves all in late-summer darkness. She was sure that he was wondering why she wore a winter's coat on such a day, and she unbuttoned it and flapped it a little to air her armpits. The weather had a threat of change in it, her grandmother had said, and her cotton dress was too short. It had already been let down and had a false hem, which she now tried to draw down over her thighs.

"Yes, it is very warm," the man opposite her suddenly said, as if agreeing with someone else's remark.

She turned in surprise, and her face reddened, but she said nothing.

After a while, she began to wonder if it would be worth getting off at the fare-stage before the end of her journey and walk the rest of the way. Then she could spend the money on a lolly. She had to waste half an hour before her lesson, and must wander about somewhere to pass the time. It would be better to be wandering about with a lolly to suck. Her grandmother did not allow her to eat sweets—bathing the teeth in acid, she said it was.

"I believe I have seen you before," the man opposite said. "Either wending your way to or from a music lesson, I imagine." He looked knowingly at her music-case.

"To," she said sullenly.

"A budding Myra Hess," he went on. "I take it that you play the

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piano, as you seem to have no instrument secreted about your person."

She did not know what he meant, and stared out of the window, frowning, feeling so hot and anguished.

"And what is your name?" he asked. "We shall have to keep it in mind for the future when you are famous."

"Sylvia Wilkinson," she said under her breath.

"Not bad. Not bad, Sylvia. No doubt one day I shall boast that I met the great Sylvia Wilkinson on a bus one summer's afternoon. Name-dropping, you know. A harmless foible of the humble."

He was very neat and natty, but his reedy voice had a nervous tremor. All this time, he had held an unlighted cigarette in his hand, and gestured with it, but made no attempt to find matches.

"I expect at school you sing the beautiful song, 'Who Is Sylvia?' Do you?"

She shook her head without looking at him and, to her horror, he began to sing, quaveringly, "Who is Sylvia? What is she-he?"

A woman sitting a little farther down the bus turned and looked at him sharply.

He's mad, Sylvia decided. She was embarrassed, but not nervous, not nervous at all, here in the bus with other people, in spite of all her grandmother had said about not getting into conversations with strangers.

He went on singing, wagging his cigarette in time.

The woman turned again and gave him a longer stare. She was homely-looking, Sylvia decided—in spite of fair hair going very dark at the roots. She had a comfortable, protective manner, as if she were keeping an eye on the situation for Sylvia's sake.

Suddenly he broke off his singing and returned her stare. "I take it, Madam," he said, "that you do not appreciate my singing."

"I should think it's hardly the place," she said shortly, "that's all," and turned her head away.

"Hardly the place!" he said in a low voice, as if to himself, and with feigned amazement. "On a fair summer's afternoon, while we bowl merrily along the lanes. Hardly the place—to express one's joy of living! I am sorry," he said to Sylvia, in a louder voice. "I had not realized we were going to a funeral."

Thankfully, she saw that they were coming nearer to the outskirts of the town. It was not a large town and its outskirts were quiet.

"I hope you don't mind me chatting to you," the man said to Sylvia.

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"I am fond of children. I am known as being *good* with them. Well known for that. I treat them on my own level, as one should."

Sylvia stared—almost glared—out of the window, twisted round in her seat, her head aching with the stillness of her eyes.

It was flat country, intersected by canals. On the skyline were the clustered chimneys of a brick-works. The only movement out there was the faintest shimmering of heat.

She was filled by misery, for there seemed nothing in her life now but acquiescence to hated things and her grandmother's old ways setting her apart from other children. Nothing she did was what she wanted to do—school-going, church-going, now this terrible music lesson ahead of her. Since her mother's death, her life had taken a sharp turn for the worse and she could not see how it would ever be any better. She had no faith in freeing herself from it, even when she was grown up.

A wasp zigzagged across her and settled on the front of her coat. She was obliged to turn. She sat rigid, her head held back, her chin ducked in, afraid to make a movement.

"Allow me!" The awful man opposite had reached across the bus and flapped a crumpled handkerchief at her. The wasp began to fuss furiously, darting about her face.

"We'll soon settle you, you little pest," the man said, making matters worse.

The bus conductor came between them. He stood carefully still for a moment, and then decisively clapped his hands together, and the wasp fell dead to the ground.

"Thank you," Sylvia said to him, but not to the other.

They were passing bungalows now, newly built, and with unmade gardens. Looking directly ahead of her, Sylvia got up and went to the platform of the bus, standing there in a slight breeze, ready for the stopping place.

Beyond the bus shelter, she knew that there was a little general shop. She would comfort herself with a bright red lolly on a stick. She crossed the road and stood looking in the window at jars of boiled sweets and packets of detergents and breakfast cereals. There was a notice about ice creams, but she had not enough money.

She turned to go into the empty, silent shop when the now familiar and dreaded voice came from beside her. "Would you care to partake of an ice this hot afternoon?"

He stood between her and the shop and the embarrassment she had suffered on the bus gave way to terror.

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"An ice?" he repeated, holding his head on one side, looking at her imploringly.

She thought that if she said yes, she could at least get inside the shop. Someone must be there to serve, someone whose protection she might depend upon. Those words of warning from her grandmother came into her head, cautionary tales, dark with unpleasant hints.

Before she could move, or reply, she felt a hand lightly but firmly touch her shoulder. It was the glaring woman from the bus, she was relieved to see.

"Haven't you ever been told not to talk to strangers?" she asked Sylvia quite sharply, but with calm common sense in her brusqueness. "*You'd* better be careful," she said to the man menacingly. "Now come along, child, and let this be a lesson to you. Which way were you going?"

Sylvia nodded ahead.

"Well, best foot forward, and keep going. And *you*, my man, can kindly step in a different direction, or I'll find a policeman."

At this last word, Sylvia turned to go, feeling flustered but important.

"You should *never*," the woman began, going along beside her. "There's some funny people about these days. Doesn't your mother warn you?"

"She's dead."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry about that. My God, it's warm." She pulled her dress away from her bosom, fanning it. She had a shopping basket full of comforting, homely groceries and Sylvia looked into it as she walked beside her.

"Wednesday's always my day," the woman said. "Early closing here, so I take the bus up to Horseley. I have a relative who has the little general store there. It makes a change, but not in this heat."

She rambled on about her uninteresting affairs. Once, Sylvia glanced back and could see the man still standing there, gazing after them.

"I shouldn't turn round," the woman said. "Which road did you say?"

Sylvia hadn't but now did so.

"Well, you can come my way. That would be better, and there's nothing much in it. Along by the gravel pits. I'll have a quick look round before we turn the corner."

When she did so, she said that she thought they were being fol-

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lowed, at a distance. "Oh, it's disgraceful," she said. "And with all the things you read in the papers. You can't be too careful, and you'll have to remember that in the future. I'm not sure I ought not to inform the police."

Along this road, there were disused gravel pits, and chicory and convolvulus. Rusty sorrel and rustier tin cans gave the place a derelict air. On the other side, there were allotments, and ramshackle tool-sheds among dark nettles.

"It runs into Hamilton Road," the woman explained.

"But I don't have to be there for another half hour," Sylvia said nervously. She could imagine Miss Harrison's face if she turned up on the doorstep all that much too soon, in the middle of a lesson with the bright-looking girl she had often met leaving.

"I'm going to give you a nice cup of tea and make sure you're all right. Don't you worry."

Thankfully, she turned in at the gate of a little red-brick house at the edge of the wasteland. It was ugly, but very neat, and surrounded by hollyhocks. The beautifully shining windows were draped with frilly, looped-up curtains with plastic flowers arranged between them.

Sylvia followed the woman down a side path to the back door, trying to push her worries from her mind. She was all right this time, but what of all the future Wednesdays? she wondered—with their perilous journeys to be made alone.

She stood in the kitchen and looked about her. It was clean and cool there. A budgerigar hopped in a cage. Rather listlessly, but not knowing what else to do, she went to it and ran her fingernail along the wires.

"There's my baby boy, my little Joey," the woman said in a singsong, automatic way as she held the kettle under the tap. "You'll feel better when you've had a cup of tea," she added, now supposedly addressing Sylvia.

"It's very kind of you."

"Any woman would do the same. There's a packet of Oval Marie in my basket if you'd like to open it and put them on this plate."

Sylvia was glad to do something. She arranged the biscuits carefully on the rose-patterned plate. "It's very nice here," she said. Her grandmother's house was so dark and cluttered, Miss Harrison's even more so. Both smelt stuffy, of thick curtains and old furniture. She did not go into many houses, for she was so seldom invited

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anywhere. She was a dull girl, whom nobody liked very much, and she knew it.

"I must have everything sweet and fresh," the woman said complacently.

The kettle began to sing.

I've still got to get home, Sylvia thought in a panic. She stared up at a flypaper hanging in the window—the only disconcerting thing in the room. Some of the flies were still half alive and striving hopelessly to free themselves. But they were caught forever.

She heard footsteps on the path and listened in surprise, but the woman did not seem to hear, or lift her head. She was spooning tea from the caddy into the teapot.

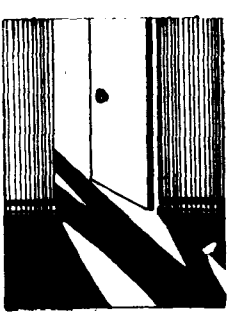
"Just in time, Herbert," she called out.

Sylvia turned round as the door opened. With astonished horror, she saw the man from the bus step confidently into the kitchen.

"Well done, Mable!" he said, closing the door behind him. "Don't forget one for the pot." He smiled, smoothing his hands together, surveying the room.

Sylvia spun round questioningly to the woman, who was now bringing the teapot to the table, and she noticed for the first time that there were three cups and saucers laid there.

"Well, sit down, do," the woman said a little impatiently. "It's all ready."



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a *NEW* Mahboob Chaudri story by

JOSH PACHTER

Camels! The ships of the desert, they were called, and Mahboob Chaudri could understand why: he felt himself about to become seasick at any moment. Dear Allah, he prayed fervently, if the worst should happen, allow me at least to avoid soiling my uniform and disgracing myself!

The third in Josh Pachter's appealing new series about Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri, officer on the Bahraini police force, a sensitive man who takes his responsibilities very seriously indeed . . .

THE TREE OF LIFE

by JOSH PACHTER

This is a privilege, he kept reminding himself as he bounced and jounced and feared for his life. Oh, dearie me, Chaudri, don't forget it is a privilege!

Since all of the camels in the tiny island emirate of Bahrain were owned by the Royal Family, an invitation to ride one as a reward for service to the al-Khalifa government was indeed a privilege.

It was not, however, a pleasure.

Back home in Karachi, Chaudri had taken his children more than once to ride the gaily decorated tourist camels at Clifton Beach, but this was the first time he had ever mounted one of the ugly, sour-smelling beasts himself. The weathered wooden saddle and thin cloth cushion he sat on were intensely uncomfortable, and the creature's clumsy rolling gait jarred his long-suffering head at every stride.

He had been aboard the animal for over an hour now, and he was deeply regretting the chain of events which had put him there. If he had known that the government would bestow this honor on him

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for preventing the attempted theft of that little bit of stone from the National Museum from turning into an international incident, he might just have let that photographer get away with it. The museum's curator had given him a golden replica of the famous Dilmun seal as a reward for his recovery of the original. That was nice—he'd had one of the Arab jewelers in the *suq* turn it into a lovely necklace for Shazia. But this. This *privilege.* He had managed to put it off for several months with assorted excuses, but his luck had finally run out and here he was.

Camels! The ships of the desert, they were called, and Mahboob Chaudri could understand why: he felt himself about to become seasick at any moment. Dear Allah, he prayed fervently, if the worst should happen, allow me at least to avoid soiling my uniform and disgracing myself!

He understood now, too, the truth behind the ancient poet's description of the nomadic Arab tribesmen who had formerly roamed the desert as "the parasites of the camel." As he rode through the scorching heat, Chaudri had frequent occasion to consult the *jirbeh* he had been given, the goatskin bag of sweet water which hung by his side. But the hulking camel plodded on steadily, diligently, not showing the slightest sign of weakness or thirst. Man was not well suited for life in the desert—but with his camels to provide transportation, and milk in times of no water, and meat in times of no food, the Bedouin could survive even this most harsh and desolate of existences.

A sudden crack from below broke the stillness of the afternoon. Chaudri leaned to his left and looked down—to see beneath him the remains of one unfortunate ship of the desert which had capsized in this infinite ocean of sand. Its skeleton had been picked clean by carrion birds and bleached a dusty white by the ferocious summer sun and largely covered over by the ever-shifting sands, but its gently curved jawbone still lay on the surface of the desert and the hoof of Chaudri's camel had shattered the brittle bone and the oversized ivory teeth loudly.

"Desert driftwood," said Chaudri aloud, though there was no one but the camel to hear. He turned the words over in his mind as his mount moved remorselessly onward, indifferent to the lonely fate of its cousin. The phrase pleased him: those scattered bones, softly sculptured by wind and sand, were indeed the flotsam and jetsam of the arid vastness that made up most of Bahrain's 250 square miles.

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He had left the inhabited northern half of the island behind him an hour or more earlier, had passed the national oil company's residential compound at Awali and skirted around the base of the Jebel ad-Dukhan, the Mountain of Smoke. At less than 400 feet in height, it was not much of a mountain, but it was the emirate's highest point, and on a clear day the whole of the country, from al-Muharraq in the north to Ras al-Barr in the south, could be seen from its summit.

Chaudri drank sparingly from the *jirbeh* at his side, then touched the few droplets of water which clung to his upper lip with the point of his tongue so as not to waste even the smallest amount of the precious fluid. His olive-green uniform was itchy and sticky with perspiration. He felt foolish with the traditional red-and-white checkered *ghutra* on his head, but the camel master had insisted he wear it as protection from sunstroke. At least there was no one around to see how incongruous it looked in combination with his uniform.

There was no one anywhere, there was nothing to see and no one to see it. Just Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri and his trusty camel alone in the middle of an endless expanse of sand and dead or dying brush, the midday sun dizzying his poor brain in spite of the *ghutra,* and his aching body numbed by now to the further indignities of the torturous ride.

He would feel it tomorrow, he knew. *O pehan yah geya,* he would feel it tomorrow—unless he was lucky enough to perish today, to tumble insensate from the back of this damnable beast and give up his bruised flesh to the birds and his battered bones to the sun.

"A privilege," he muttered dully, reaching for his half-empty *jirbeh* with a tired hand. "By the beard of the Prophet, it's a privilege."

When at long last he saw the Tree of Life take shape through the shimmering haze of heat before him, his first thought was that it must be a mirage. This was his destination, his turn-around point—a sad reminder of the fact that there had once been an underground spring beneath this far corner of the desert. Legend had it that this was the very Tree of Life which the Lord God had planted for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But *this* tree was long dead, its trunk wasted, its branches barren—and the Garden of Eden had crumbled to a wilderness of unfriendly sand.

One minute the tree stood there, not a hundred yards distant, and the next minute, miragelike, it was gone. In its place was an angry

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tan swirl in the air, and a strange, low-pitched whistling that teased Chaudri's ears.

Mirage?, he wondered, and then his sun-baked mind shifted back into focus and a different word stabbed horribly at his consciousness.

Shumal.

The deadly scourge of the desert sandstorm!

Instantly alert, the Pakistani's thoughts raced frantically over the available options. Back in the city, the *shumal* was nothing to fear—one simply fled indoors until the raging winds had spent themselves. But out here there was no shelter to be had. And since the wind could carry the suffocating sand in any direction, flight was as likely to be futile as helpful. *More* likely.

Grateful now for the *ghutra,* Chaudri wrapped its long tails across his mouth to keep the choking sand from his throat and lungs. He dug his heels into his camel's flanks and urged it forward, straight toward the spot where he had seen the Tree of Life. If he could find it again, at least he would have something sturdy to hang onto.

And there it was, immediately in front of him! With all his dwindling strength, he pulled back on the length of rope that served him as reins and managed to bring the lumbering animal to a halt. Forgetting the camel master's careful instructions on dismounting, he swung his left leg to the beast's right side and jumped quickly to the sand. He tore the black *agal* which held the *ghutra* in place from his head, figure-eighted it, and forced the camel's forehooves into its loops, hobbling the creature to prevent it from wandering away into the storm.

Then he sat down with his back to the tree, settling himself as firmly as possible against it, and squeezed his eyes shut tight. The wind roared furiously around him. The whirling grains of sand stung at the exposed skin of his face and the backs of his hands like a thousand sharpened needles. He thought he could make out the hoarse breathing of the camel through the clamor of the wind, but assumed he was hearing that sound with his imagination, not his ears.

At least he could breathe. The mesh of the *ghutra* was fine enough to filter out the gritty desert sand from the air he drew in with great, shuddering, frightened gasps.

Merea rabba, he told himself bitterly. First that miserable ride, and now this! And today was Friday, supposedly his day of rest, when he could have been back at the police barracks in Juffair,

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reading a book or chatting with Sikander Malek and the other men from Karachi!

He shifted position irritably, already beginning to feel the soreness in his joints return, and his hand brushed against something hard and smooth and warm, half buried in the sand. More desert driftwood. He lifted the object and held it with both hands in his lap to keep the wind from picking it up and flinging it at him. He could not see it, with the *shumal* raging and his eyes closed, but he traced its bleached surface with his fingertips, comforted by the feel of something firm and unyielding amidst the maelstrom.

It was nearly round—a globe, a skull with the jawbone broken away but the upper row of teeth still in place. The deep eye sockets told him which side was the front. The back of the head was—

It was almost round. And the teeth were much too small.

A camel has teeth the size of a 10-fils coin, he remembered, and its head is elongated, not practically spherical.

This was the skull of a human being.

"Charming!" exclaimed Dr. Emad Rezk, looking up from his microscope with a glint in his eye and a beatific smile on his oval face. "Perfectly charming. Oh, my fascinating friend, you never fail to bring me the most delightful surprises."

Rezk, an Egyptian, was a professor of science at the Gulf Polytechnic University. He was frequently asked to do labwork for the emirate's Public Security Force, which did not yet have a forensics department of its own, though the Ministry of the Interior had been promising one for several years.

"Human?" Mahboob Chaudri asked the man now.

"Oh, yes," Rezk responded. "Oh, yes, indeed, most definitely human. See for yourself."

As Chaudri bent toward the eyepiece, a spasm of pain clutched cruelly at his lower back. He straightened with a groan.

"Something wrong, my friend?"

The Pakistani smiled weakly. The *shumal* had lasted for almost half an hour, leaving his nut-brown face and hands agonizingly raw. Then had come the endless ride back to civilization which had been even worse than the trip out to the Tree of Life—though at least the day had become somewhat cooler. When he had finally returned to the barracks in Juffair, he had rubbed a soothing ointment into his tender, windburned skin, soaked his aching muscles in a hot tub for an hour, and then gone straight to bed. But this morning he was

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back on duty, though his body was stiff and sore all over, and the only thing that hurt him worse than moving was the torture of sitting or standing still.

"No, no," he lied, "I am quite all right." He was, after all, an officer of the police, and the Security Force's image of impassive strength and dignity must at all cost be maintained. He forced himself to peer at the meaningless jumble of cells displayed in the microscope's field of view, then nodded his head wisely and said, "Yes, I see."

Rezk chuckled. "You are quite all right," he said indulgently, "and you see. Very well, my friend." He grinned mischievously. "Then tell me: what *else* can you say about the former possessor of this magnificent pericranial specimen, other than the fact that he was human?"

"Ah," said Chaudri sagely, "but that is your specialty, Doctor. I would not want to rob you of your moment of scholarly exposition. And besides, I have not been trained in these matters. I can tell very little, I'm afraid. The skull belongs to a Bedouin, of course, an adult male—that much is obvious. He did not die a natural death. Oh, no: he was murdered. Murdered by strangulation, at least ten years ago. But other than those simple facts I can tell nothing. I depend on you for further enlightenment."

The Egyptian stared at him, dumbfounded. "How—how can you know all that?" he spluttered. "You looked at one preparation only, and at that for but a few seconds! Where did you study forensic medicine, my amazing friend, and why have you never told me that you did?"

Now it was Chaudri's turn to laugh. "I know nothing of forensic medicine," he admitted. "But after five years in Bahrain, I know much of the Arabic way of life. Everything I told you I knew almost as soon as I first discovered the skull, without recourse to your microscopes and preparations."

"But how? Yes, the size of the specimen alone suggests that the victim was an adult, but how do you know he was a Bedouin, a male, and dead for at least ten years? I can list at least a dozen indications which prove you to be right, but nothing you can have seen without careful chemical testing and a great deal of very specialized knowledge."

"To one who knows a bit about the Arab," Chaudri explained, "this simple skull speaks eloquently. Who but a Bedouin would lie buried beneath the desert sands? A city dweller or a peasant would have a more traditional resting place, in a cemetery in Manama or

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one of the villages. Only a Bedouin would be left in the desert, and then only if he had died ten or more years ago, before the government implemented its policy of sedentarization, of settling the various Bedouin clans in villages so that they could be kept track of, controlled, and taxed."

"But how can you say he was murdered—strangled, no less! All we have here is a skull, without a mark of violence on it. And how do you know he was a male?"

"If he had been buried with the usual care and ceremony of a Bedouin funeral, a thousand years of *shumals* would never have uncovered his bones. No, he was buried hastily, without ceremony and too close to the surface of the desert. Why? Because he had been murdered, and his killer wanted to get the body under the sand before the crime was discovered.

"And if you agree that there was a murder, then it follows that the victim was a male and an adult, and that he was strangled, because only a Bedouin would have reason to kill another Bedouin—and a Bedouin would never slay a woman or a child, and when a Bedouin murders he invariably does so by strangulation. As I said, Doctor, it's all quite simple if you only understand the Arab's way of life."

Emad Rezk shook his head in bafflement. "If you already knew all that, my dear Chaudri, then why on earth did you bother coming to me?"

"Because deduction based on a knowledge of the Arab is all well and good," the Pakistani answered, "but police work rests on scientific proof, not confident guesswork. I feel certain that my ideas are correct, but I need your opinion before bringing them up with my superiors."

"Well, I'm afraid that I can't help you as much as you might wish. Yes, the dead man—and it *was* a man—was a Bedouin, perhaps between thirty and forty years of age at the time of his death, which was at least fifteen and possibly as many as twenty-five years ago. But was he strangled? Was he truly murdered at all? Your deductions sound convincing to me, my friend, but there is no evidence to either confirm or contradict them. Unfortunately, I can tell you nothing more."

"Unfortunately," Mahboob Chaudri scowled, "you have already told me something rather important."

"I have?"

"You have. You've told me that I am likely to be spending a great

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deal of my time drinking Bedouin coffee over the next few days." He turned to go, then thought better of it and faced his friend Rezk once more. "And I detest Bedouin coffee," he complained.

Sitting crosslegged on the worn palm-frond matting which covered the floor of the *majlis,* the main living area of Sheikh Mahmood's coral-and-rubble house, Mahboob Chaudri waggled his tiny porcelain cup from side to side to say that he had drunk as much of the cardamon-flavored liquid as he desired. One more cup, he thought irritably, his stomach purring with hunger and too much coffee, and I will float away to sea.

This was the sixth Bedouin village Chaudri had been to since his session with Emad Rezk the day before. Still sore in every muscle of his body, he had dragged himself down countless narrow alleyways, searching diligently for the identical government-constructed home of each village's sheikh. The sheikh did not "rule" his clan, of course—even though they had been successfully sedentarized, the Bedouins still recognized no power higher than that of each separate individual. The sheikh was, instead, an arbiter, an advisor, a respected figure who exerted considerable influence, while avoiding any pretense of actual authority. Still, the sheikh's residence was the logical place for Chaudri to begin his inquiries in each village.

And five times now those inquiries had gone no further. *La,* five sheikhs had told him, after the ritual exchange of formal compliments and the drinking of too many cups of the slightly bitter coffee Chaudri despised, no one of my *qawm* has ever vanished into the desert—not twenty years ago, never. Some have died, of course, and a few of the young have taken jobs in the city or gone away to school. But none have disappeared, none have run away out of anger or sorrow. Our *qawmiya* here, our feeling of unity, is very strong.

This time, though, in this sixth village on Chaudri's tour of the country's Bedouin communities, when the amenities were finally over and the Pakistani posed at last his question, Sheikh Mahmood rocked back on his heels and stroked his white beard thoughtfully. "Hassan. It's a long time ago, but yes, it's Hassan you describe. Hassan al-Shama, we called him."

Chaudri had never heard the expression before. "What does it mean, al-Shama?"

The old man smiled. "The city Arabs have always thought of us as lazy wandering gypsies," he said, "traveling only in order to avoid regular work, stealing from the peasants, taking what we can from

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society and giving back nothing at all. But in truth the Bedouin's life is harsh and always challenging. It takes great skill to survive in the desert, and great courage. During the rainy season, for two months of every year, the desert is Allah's garden. Then we can stay in one place for a while, then our life is less bitter. But for most of the year, we move about because we must. We go where the rain is, since where there is rain there is water to drink and grass for our animals.

"*Shama* is a Bedouin word—it means 'to watch for flashes of lightning in the distance so as to see where the next rain will fall.' So Hassan al-Shama was, for us, Hassan the Watcher. He had marvelous eyes: he knew where the rain would come long before anyone else in the *qawm*. Then we would hurry to the place he had seen and we would stay there until the sun and the wind destroyed the grass brought forth by the rain."

"And you say this Hassan disappeared?"

"Yes." The old sheikh rocked back and forth as he spoke, his voice a crooning murmur. "One afternoon, many years ago, perhaps ten years before they brought us to this village, Hassan went off alone into the desert to watch. I remember the day very well. It was summer, we had no water at all. We were living off the milk of our camels, and Hassan went off alone to watch. There was a rainstorm that day. It was a miracle, a magnificent downpour at the very spot where we were already camped. By nightfall there was grass as far as the eye could see. But Hassan did not return. He never returned. His first wife, Aiysha, still waits for him. He will come back when the *qawm* needs him, she thinks. She has been waiting for twenty years."

"And his other wives?"

"He had one other wife, Falila." The sheikh sighed. "It was not a good marriage. That one does not wait for her husband's return: a year after we last saw him, she left the *qawm* with Hassan's younger brother, Ali. They went to live in al-Hidd, near the airport. They are still there, I think. I am told they have a cold store, though I've never been there myself."

"Did you report Hassan's disappearance to the authorities?"

"The authorities," Sheikh Mahmood scoffed. "What have the authorities to do with my *qawm?* We take care of ourselves, we look after our own—we have no need of your laws, your taxes, your authorities. When Hassan the Watcher went off, in the *Aiyamu'l Arab,* the day of the Arab, *we* were the only authorities in the

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desert—we reported nothing. *Today* we report, and see what has happened to us."

He waved a feeble hand at the coral walls which surrounded him, their recessed niches filled with the many accoutrements of the settled life. He glared at the wind tower in the corner, at the electric lights above. "We have become weak," he mourned, "we have lost our heritage. The *Aiyamu'l Arab* is at an end."

The front door of the house to which Sheikh Mahmood had directed him was wide open. Chaudri stood in the doorway and peered into the gloomy space within. The building—like all of the residences in all of the Bedouin villages he had visited—was built to the same size and general floor plan as the home of the sheikh, but even in the dim sunlight which filtered in through the closed wooden shutters he could see that this home was much more simply furnished than was usual—a plain table bearing a basin and a pitcher of sweet water, a cushioned bench, a chair, *mankur* matting on the floor, a minimum of other odds and ends. The mangrove beams supporting the ceiling were, though attractive, strictly functional. The only decorative touch in the room was the framed photograph on the far wall. Oddly, it was not the standard color portrait of the Emir, but a yellowed newspaper clipping of John F. Kennedy, the American President who had been shot and killed around the time of Hassan's disappearance. He was outdoors, behind a waist-high lectern, in a somber black suit, delivering a speech to the great crowd which surrounded him, a broad, confident smile on his youthful face.

The face of the woman who sat in the chair by the shuttered window was old, the story of her fifty years in the desert and her decade in this village written across it in tortured lines. She wore a simple red shift, its half sleeves and neckline trimmed with bands of gold, and over it a loose white sleeveless tunic. There were gold bracelets on her wrists and a tiny silver ball affixed to the right side of her nose just above the nostril.

She was sewing the hem of an *aba* with fine black thread, and Chaudri wondered how she could see to work in such poor light. A mangy grey kitten, its enormous ears stiff and pointed like the horns of a devil, caressed her bare foot silently and the woman absently stroked its fur with her toes. Neither of them gave the slightest sign they were aware of Chaudri's presence in the doorway. He waited there for several minutes and then he put his fist before his mouth and coughed self-consciously.

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The old woman raised her head. "Who is that?" she demanded querulously. "Who's there?"

He took a step forward. "My name is Chaudri," he explained. "I—"

"Chaudri? I don't know any Chaudri. You're not of my *qawm,* are you? Where do you come from? What do you want here?"

What was she babbling about? She could *see* he was not a member of her clan, couldn't she, with his Pakistani features and his Public Security uniform? Unless she was senile, perhaps, or—

Ah, yes, of course. Nothing decorative in the house, except for the single dusty picture which had obviously been hanging there undisturbed, unlooked at, for years. The shutters closed and no artificial lighting, yet the ability to do detailed handwork in the almost-darkness of the room. The old woman was blind.

She had lost her sight sometime since the sedentarization of the *qawm*—the photo on the wall told him that she had been able to see for at least part of the time she had lived here—and now he was about to take away from her as well the hope of her husband's return, a hope she had cherished for the past twenty years of her life.

How did one steal a helpless old woman's dream? What words did one use to soften the terrible blow?

"I come from the police," Chaudri said to her tentatively. "I come to speak with you about Hassan."

"Hassan is dead," she replied, with the simple conviction of one who spoke a self-evident truth.

Chaudri was stunned. "But—but Sheikh Mahmood told me you believed him still to be alive."

She made an exasperated spitting noise and kicked the scrawny kitten away from her abruptly. With an angry yowl, it bolted through the open doorway and out into the street beyond.

"Sheikh Mahmood is even older than I am," she said. "He is an honest man, and often a wise one, but he sees only what he chooses to see." She touched a hand to her useless eyes. "Even with *these,* I am not so blind that I cannot tell the difference between reality and a foolish dream."

"I hear no bitterness in your voice," said Chaudri.

"About my eyes, do you mean? Or about my husband? I loved Hassan, and I loved my sight. But there is no God but God, and who am I to question His wisdom?"

There was a serene strength to her which Chaudri had never before experienced in a woman, or in a man either, and he watched

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with admiration and respect as her nimble fingers worked tight stitches along the fabric of the *aba*. "Tell me about Hassan," he said.

She sighed deeply and set aside the cloth, needle, and thread. "Hassan." The quality of her voice had changed—it no longer fit with the wrinkles etched into her face. It was young and vibrant, the voice of a woman who loved. She thought back across the gulf of years and gathered her memories around her like a warm and comfortable cloak.

"He was not a member of our *qawm* by birth. But when we met in the desert and decided to marry more than thirty years ago, instead of asking me to leave my family and put on the skin of his clan, he came to us and put on the skin of ours. Ali came with him: their parents were long dead, there was no other close family, his place was with his brother. Ali was good with the animals—the camels, the sheep, the goats—but Hassan was a watcher. He knew where the rain would fall before anyone else. Some said he didn't need to watch at all, that Allah came to him in the night and told him of His plans for rain."

"And Falila?" Chaudri prompted gently.

A frown flickered across the cracked, pale lips. "Falila was a baby when Hassan and I first met, an infant. Many summers passed and she grew into a complicated child, strong-willed and hot-tempered, but in the end always loyal to the *qawm* and respectful of her elders. She loved Ali even then, I think, but Sheikh Mahmood suggested that it would be good for Hassan to take a second wife, and it was agreed that Falila should be his bride."

Because of her blindness it was not necessary to look at her while she spoke, and Chaudri's gaze swept the dimly lit room with professional interest. The niches in the walls were mostly empty. A closed door led off to the rest of the simple dwelling. There was an inscription printed across the bottom of the photograph on the wall—the letters were too small for him to make out, but he could see that a few words of Arabic had been handwritten in above the typeset line of English text.

"A few more years went by," the woman continued. "Hassan and I grew even closer than we had been before his marriage to Falila. He cared for me with great tenderness. He gave me all I asked him for—all except for one single thing."

"And what was that?"

"He would not treat my sister Falila with the respect she deserved

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as his wife—and what pained my sister pained me, and the entire clan."

Chaudri was taken aback. "Sheikh Mahmood did not mention that you were sisters."

The woman's smile revealed a flash of gold at the back of her mouth. "We were married to the same man. That made us sisters."

"Ah. But Hassan favored you."

"He loved me," she said. "And at first he seemed to love Falila, too. But she was still a child when he married her, and his feeling for her faded as she grew into womanhood. The Quran says that a man may take four wives if he so desires, but he must treat them with complete equality. Hassan's only failing was that where he treated me with kindness and love, he came to treat Falila with nothing more than cold contempt."

Chaudri stood up and moved about the room in a vain attempt to ease the soreness of his muscles. "Why?" he asked. "Why did he hate her?"

Aiysha shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. She was a good wife to him for a long time after he began to mistreat her. Finally, though, she became resentful. What woman would not?"

There was no way to avoid it any longer. "Might she have become resentful enough to follow him into the desert on the day he disappeared," Chaudri said, "to murder him in anger and bury his body beneath the sand?"

The old woman considered it. "Yes," she said, and there was sudden craftiness in her tone, "she might have."

"Do you think she did?"

The answer, this time, was immediate and forthright: "No."

"No," Chaudri repeated. "But of course she is your sister. If she did kill your husband, or if you *thought* she had, would you tell me?"

She looked straight at him as if she could see him. For a moment, Chaudri glimpsed the spirited nomad she must have been as a girl. "No," she said again, "I would not. My *qawmiya* runs very deep. And though Falila and Ali have gone to the city, they are still of my clan. My loyalty is to my sisters and brothers, not to you or to the uniform you wear."

Chaudri was standing next to the framed photograph of John F. Kennedy, and as he tried to think of a response he read the line of printing at the base of the picture. It was a quotation he remembered having heard as a child. "Ask not what your country can do for you," the inscription ran, "ask rather what you can do for your country."

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The word "country" had twice been crossed out and both times the word *"qawm"* had been written in above it in precise Arabic calligraphy.

Ask rather what you can do for your *qawm.*

The blind woman would not hesitate to withhold information from him. She would not hesitate to *lie* to him if she thought that was needed to protect her clan from danger.

Chaudri did not agree with her attitude. Nor could he approve. But as he looked down at the firm set of her determined old face, he felt in his heart that he understood.

A light breeze rippled the emerald waters of the Khawr al-Qulayah as Mahboob Chaudri steered his Land Rover across the narrow causeway to al-Muharraq, second most important of the thirty-three islands in the Bahraini archipelago. To avoid the twisted labyrinth of the old town, he turned off the Sheikh Salman Road at the end of the causeway, past the bustling shipyard of the *dhow* builders and the Coast Guard barracks and the Abu Mahir fort. He followed the road around the inner curve of the horseshoe-shaped island, along the international airport's perimeter fence and out to al-Hidd.

The cold store was only a few doors down from the al-Khalifa Road police station, within sight of the graceful white minaret of a neighborhood mosque. The shop's windows were piled high with boxes of Omo and Tide, disposable razors in cardboard blister packs, candies and chewing gum and breakfast cereals and bags of British and American cookies. From a poster advertising cigarettes taped to the inside of the door, a camel regarded him suspiciously with a single narrowed eye. He avoided its steady gaze with a shudder.

The sea breeze which had cooled him while he was driving was gone now and he was grateful for the air-conditioning that greeted him as he entered the store. There were few customers at this time of day: a woman in a black *aba* picking through a bin of tomatoes and muttering irritably to herself as she rejected each of them in turn, two children leafing the pages of an Arabic Sesame Street comic at the magazine rack by the door. A man in a *thobe* was rearranging a shelf of canned goods in the back and a woman in Western clothing sat on a high stool by the electronic cash register, the only modern fixture to be seen. The cashier glanced at him as he crossed to the cooler in the corner, helped himself to a dewy can of Pocari Sweat, ripped off its poptop, and drank deeply, then she went back to her newspaper.

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Chaudri waited patiently while the children finished giggling at their magazine, replaced it on the rack, dawdled over the candy display before selecting a brightly colored package of bubble gum, and went back out into the street, blowing and snapping a series of ever-larger pink bubbles. He waited while the woman in the *aba* finally settled on three small tomatoes and grudgingly paid for them, complaining all the while about their lack of freshness and their price. He drank his Japanese soda and waited until he was alone in the shop with Ali and Falila, the younger brother and second wife of the dead man, Hassan al-Shama. Then he set down his empty can and said the words old Aiysha had said to him but a few hours earlier. "Hassan is dead."

Falila's hands spasmed, ripping her paper cleanly down the middle. Ali dropped a can of fava beans, which knocked over a pile of jam jars, shattering more than one on the cold concrete floor.

A gratifying response, thought Mahboob Chaudri.

"Of course he's dead." The woman scowled. The shock of Chaudri's sudden announcement had worn off. "If we hadn't believed him to be dead, we would never have left the *qawm* and begun a new life together. We would have stayed in the desert and waited for him to return." The black kohl that had been applied in a broad band across her eyelids did nothing to conceal the crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes. Her powder and lipstick did not disguise the damage time had done to her face. The man in the *thobe* came and stood by her side, with the counter on which customers piled their purchases between them and the Pakistani.

"But why did you believe him dead?" Chaudri wanted to know.

It was Ali who answered, his dark face tight with a blending of concern and anger: "He went away. He was gone for a year. He did not come back. Obviously he was dead. Hassan would never have deserted the *qawm* once he had put on its skin. His *qawmiya* was much too strong."

Chaudri remembered that Aiysha had said almost the same thing about her own sense of loyalty to the clan. "And your *qawmiya?*" he asked, addressing them both. "Why did *you* go away a year after Hassan's disappearance?"

Again it was Ali who spoke. "My brother was not good to Falila," he said. "It saddens me to admit that, but it is true. I was as kind to her as I could be to try to make up at least a little bit for the shame Hassan's behavior brought to her and to the clan. We grew

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close, Falila and I. When Hassan—went away, we grew closer. I wanted to marry her, but although the Quran allows a man to take four wives a woman may have only a single husband. We were certain Hassan must be dead, but our certainty was not enough. In the eyes of the *qawm,* my brother still lived, so we could not marry, we could not even allow them to see the love we shared without further disturbing the harmony of the clan." He drew himself up and said proudly, "It was *because* of our *qawmiya* that we came to al-Hidd, so we could live our lives as man and wife without bringing still more shame to our people."

Never in Mahboob Chaudri's career had he felt so perplexed. The constant ache in his muscles had dulled by now to a mild discomfort, but his muddled brain was throbbing with the greater pain of confusion.

Hassan had treated Falila badly, that much he knew. Had she killed him for that reason, to free herself from his hatred? Surely not: she had been but a girl at the time, how could she have strangled him?

Had Hassan been strangled, after all? That conclusion was as yet unproven, was nothing more, really, than the flimsiest of deductions.

Well, then, had *Ali* committed the murder, to rescue Falila from his brother's grasp? Was Hassan's death the first step in Ali's campaign to win the girl for his own, the girl who already loved him, the girl who he perhaps already loved?

But not only these two had had a motive for following Hassan al-Shama into the desert that day, for robbing him of his life and burying him beneath the sand. Though Hassan had been invaluable to the clan as a watcher, his failure to treat his wives equally, as prescribed by the Holy Quran, had disturbed the effectiveness, the balance, of his *qawm*'s social structure. And to the Bedouins, that balance was all important: the clan must function smoothly and cooperatively to survive in the unforgiving harshness of the desert. To restore harmony, anyone in the qawm might have killed Hassan, even Sheikh Mahmood himself.

Especially Sheikh Mahmood, if it came down to that.

Which of them was guilty? How could he ever answer that question, given the Bedouins' powerful mistrust of the Bahraini government, which had compelled them to give up their nomadic existence—of any government which might challenge their centuries-old autonomy? And, worse, how could he hope to find an answer

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to this riddle given the even more powerful stricture of *qawmiya*, the tribal loyalty that made him despair of ever getting the truth out of any of them?

Oh, dearie me, Mahboob Chaudri thought sorrowfully, my head!

This time he used the Land Rover to go out into the desert. Beyond the tropospheric scatter stations and the site of oil well number one, the road ended, but the four-wheel-drive vehicle had been built for the sand and Chaudri continued on at speed. The camel may have been the ship of the desert in the good old days, he thought, but no more. Today it is this mighty creature which deserves that title.

It seemed like no time at all before he reached the Tree of Life, its squat black outline sharp against the burning blue of the sky. He switched off the Land Rover's engine and an overwhelming silence settled across the desert. From the top of the Jebel ad-Dukhan only a few miles to the north, one could see how small Bahrain truly was. But here, with nothing but a blanket of sand stretching out to the horizon in every direction, the country seemed infinite. Chaudri felt himself no more than the merest speck in the unthinkable vastness of the cosmos.

Why had he come back to this place? To look for more bones, hoping to learn at last the truth of the means of Hassan al-Shama's death? No. The area had been thoroughly searched already—there were no more bones to be found. And besides, he knew, he could feel it in *his* bones, that the man had indeed been strangled.

Had he come, then, expecting the murderer to return to the scene of his crime, as they often did in the detective novels he was fond of reading during his off-duty hours? No. This was reality, not a work of fiction, and it was the Middle East, not the decadent West. And it was twenty years after the fact. There would be no return—not now.

Why, then, was he here, surrounded by emptiness, not a bird in flight, not a clump of scrub brush to be seen, not a sound except for the noiseless whisper of the heat? He had come to visit the Tree of Life, to stand before it and ask it for guidance.

"They say that it was God who put you here," he began. He spoke the words in his mind, not aloud, and realized with interest that he was thinking them in Arabic rather than in his own native language. He was actually talking to the Tree, he knew then, and not only to himself. "They say that a beautiful garden was built around you, and that you are the Mother of life and death.

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"Tell me, then, about the death of Hassan al-Shama. Tell me the truth of what happened here a score of years ago."

And there, alone in the desert, the Tree answered him.

Chaudri left his Land Rover and plunged into the maze of narrow streets. He went by dozens of the identical coral houses, their wooden shutters closed against the afternoon's blazing heat, their wind towers pointing like miniature minarets at the sun overhead.

Just outside an open doorway, he stopped. He peered into the room beyond, and when his eyes at last adjusted to the dimness within he saw her. She sat crosslegged on the floor, a plump satin pillow on the ground before her. A large round aluminum tray lay on the pillow. There was rice on the tray, and she was cleaning the rice to prepare it for cooking.

Her hands, he noticed then, were very strong.

To the Bedouin, Chaudri thought, loyalty to the clan is all important. More important, even, than loyalty to a devoted husband. More important even than that.

It had had to be that way, of course, in the days when the nomads had roamed the desert. The life, the harmony, the efficiency of the *qawm* must always be preserved even at the expense of single individuals within the *qawm*.

Still, it made an incredible motive for murder: to kill a man, not because he treated you badly but because he treated you better than he did someone else.

Yet the Quran insisted that all a man's wives must be treated equally, and it was a disgrace to violate the Messenger's commands.

Ask not what your *qawm* can do for you. Ask rather what you can do for your *qawm*. It was a philosophy which applied no longer, now that the Bedouins had been settled into the relative security of the villages. But twenty years ago, in the *Aiyamu'l Arab,* in the desert, it had been logical and obvious—and *right.*

In spite of the heat, a sudden chill ran down the Pakistani's spine. He had been five years in Bahrain now, and he was becoming an Arab at last. He did not disturb the old woman at her work. He walked back to his Land Rover and sat there for several minutes, thinking.

Then he turned the key in the ignition and drove away.

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EQMM READERS AWARD

As announced in the October issue, we are this year initiating the EQMM Readers Award, to be given to the author of the short story readers most admire in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* this year. Of the 155 stories in the 13 issues published in 1985, which story stands out most in your memory? What single story would you recommend, or indeed have you recommended, to others? Which one are you most likely to want to read again or have you already read more than once? Which one do you think most deserves to serve as the first of such annual prize-winning stories likely to be published in an anthology some years from now?

On page 98, write in the name of the story and its author and the issue in which the story appeared. The Index in the June issue will refresh your memory of the stories published in the first six issues of 1985 and the Index in this issue lists the stories in the remaining 7 issues. If you don't have access to the June issue and don't recall the title of the story or the author's name, describe the plot as briefly and clearly as possible in the available space.

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Vote for one story only and send this page from the magazine as your ballot to the address given below *by December 31*. Photocopies or ballots with more than one choice of story will be disqualified.

The winning story will be announced in the April 1986 issue and the winning author will receive a plaque to commemorate this very special achievement—this vote of appreciation from *EQMM*'s discerning readership.

My selection for the 1985 EQMM Readers Award is

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

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"You would think in all this loveliness we would all be happy, even if eking out a living in the valley keeps our hands hard and rough and our backs a little stooped. But human misery can seep in anywhere, I guess, without being invited."

So says the young narrator in this Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings-like story by Maxine S. Nicholson, whose first published fiction this is. Mrs. Nicholson and her husband are native Floridians, but now reside six months a year in western North Carolina, the background for "Arnie." "The story is pure fiction," she writes, "but I tried to incorporate the kindness and good manners that I find so refreshing in the people of that section . . ."

ARNIE

by MAXINE S. NICHOLSON

Mama climbs down from the bedroom loft in the black-rayon dress she wore to Arnie's funeral. She is wearing her shoes and her black-cotton stockings and has combed her hair, so I know it's Thursday. Mostly, she throws on a feed-sack shift and sits in the only rocker, staring into space, not moving, not rocking, not talking at all, while Pa brings in the wood and does the farm chores and I keep house. Pa looks old and stooped, twice his actual years, but Ma is ageless as a mummy. She shuffles over to the table at mealtimes and eats a bite or two, then plods back to the rocking chair to gaze at nothing but the knotholes in the rough board wall until bedtime.

But today is Thursday.

Mama's steps are lighter. While I slap the flatiron over the napkins Mama hemstitched back before Arnie died, I can hear her taffeta slip rustle with her steps about the room. She lifts Arnie's picture from its sacred place on the mantel and carries it lovingly to the table.

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Arnie was seventeen when he died, the same age I am now, handsome where I am gawky. But I think Mama still sees him as her little boy in that picture: curly blond hair, rosy cheeks, sparkling blue eyes, dimpled hands.

Mama's face softens. "He was such a good little boy," she says as she places his photograph gently on the table. Her face is almost radiant as it used to be when he would bring her flowers. I dreaded those times.

I move carefully from the ironing board, held in place by two straight chairs, and exchange the cold flatiron for the hot one on the hearth in front of the fire. It sizzles as I test it with a little spit on my finger. I hear a board creak and know Ma's reaching up to the shelf to hand down our old cracked teapot for me to wash.

"What kind of tea are we having for the ladies today?" I ask.

I hope she will say sassafras. Then I can take a few dried wood chips from the clean white bag and toss them in the kettle to boil for a while.

Mama says, "Let's have mint tea."

I look forward to the ladies coming on Thursday, too. Still, I dread that walk to the creek to gather mint, even though it has been years since I found my cat dead there. I finish ironing the napkins and stack them neatly at one end of the table. I lift the heavy ironing board and stand it in its corner. I scrape the chairs across the room to their places at the table. After lunch, while I wash dishes, Mama will arrange them in a semicircle. There's nothing left for me to do but march down to the low place by the creek and pick mint.

I step out of the one wood door in our cabin into a world as beautiful as one could wish to see. We live in a cove with the mountains stretching up all around us, tall and taller, one behind the other, the balsam and hemlock and other pines making a blue ridge along their tops. Some days, after a rain, the steam rises from all the hidden creeks and springs like smoke from hundreds of Indian campfires. Clouds above form lights and shadows on the slopes or nestle down like fluffy blankets on the mountains themselves. I could look at those mountains forever and the picture would never be the same.

You would think in all this loveliness we would all be happy, even if eking out a living in the valley keeps our hands hard and rough and our backs a little stooped. But human misery can seep in anywhere, I guess, without being invited.

Redbirds trill. The hummingbird whirs its miniature wings on the

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way to a last wild rose. A mother grouse clucks to her chicks exactly like the hens in our chicken yard do.

I pick a mint and crush it against my teeth, savoring the sharp, clean taste. I stoop, gathering the mint and placing it in my home-made grapevine basket, being careful to avoid the spot where I found Fluffy, her eyes bulging, her throat split from ear to ear.

That day I had run back into the house, too frightened to scream. There was Arnie, bending over Ma, a bouquet of laurel in his hand. Mama's blue eyes were shiny. Arnie raised his fair head above her darker one. His eyes were as blue as Ma's, but the look he gave me was as hard as those little brown stones in the creek bed. His lips were curved in a smug snarl that Ma couldn't see.

He didn't have to whisper it. That look said, "I got even with you and there's nothing you can do about it."

I wasn't scared any more. The feeling that spread over my chest was no longer icy fingers squeezing until I had to gasp for breath. It was a lump as hard as a ball of clay after it has dried in the sun. And it kept growing. I climbed the ladder stairs, threw myself across the patchwork quilt on my narrow bed, and wept, but the stone in my throat didn't go away.

I swallow hard at the memory and finish picking mint for the afternoon tea. I hurry back to the house, ignoring the sassy robin who bobs at me from a low limb, not stopping to pick a handful of juicy blackberries from the long thorny branch across the path. In the cabin, I take the mint gently from its bed in the basket and pump cold water into the iron sink to wash it before I finish fixing dinner and spread the white tablecloth for our afternoon guests.

When the old clock on the mantel strikes three, Ma and I raise our heads to listen. Sure enough, we hear the voices and the scraping steps of Mama's friends on the porch. I rush to the door and open it wide.

I know just what to do. I have been well brought up by Mother's neighbors. Ma sits in the rocker with her hands folded and nods graciously while I greet each one by name. I take the syrup cookies from Mrs. Liza and the cupcakes from Mrs. Ida. Mrs. Jane sets a jar of wild-strawberry jam on the table.

Mrs. Ida says, "How are you, Mattie?" She sits in the high-back streight chair beside Ma, her starched gimham dress bright red beside Ma's gloomy black rayon.

"I'm tolerable, thank you, Idee. I miss my Arnie, though. He was such a good little boy."

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The other ladies take seats in the semicircle of chairs.

I step across the room to close the door, then stand by the door looking down the road, hoping Mrs. Trudy will finally come after all these years, though I know she won't. She hasn't been here since the dreadful day Arnie died.

She was Ma's special friend. Many an afternoon she used to come trudging up the hard-rock road, holding a basket of sewing in one hand and guiding her woman-child, Mae, with the other. Both of them would be dressed in calico frocks that scraped the powdery road (dresses are shorter now). They wore sturdy, lace-up, high-top shoes on their feet and bonnets on their heads. They looked like the Dutch girls in the quilt Ma had appliqued for my trundle bed.

Ma would rush to the door to take Mrs. Trudy's basket and give her a hug, and I would dance around Mae in excitement. Those were the happiest times of my life.

When our mothers settled down to their quilting and talk of neighbors, husbands, and how the hens were laying, I would dash up the ladder to the attic and bring down my dolls. I had three of them: two corn-cob dolls dressed in silvery corn shucks and one precious sawdust-stuffed doll with a china head. I called her Mae after my friend. She had curly yellow hair and blue eyes that opened and closed.

When I climbed down hugging my treasures, Mae and I would settle down in a corner to play. Mae, at fifteen, was tall as her mother. Her face and hair were as dainty as my china doll's. But her mind hadn't grown with her body, or maybe she remained a child because she couldn't speak. She was gentle and loving. Shut in that special world of those who have been born totally deaf, she could only make little grunting sounds when I showed her a baby chick in the chicken yard or we wandered into the barn to gaze at the newborn calf. I learned never to walk up behind her and grab her to get her attention. Once I had tugged at her elbow to point out a sleepy owl in the rafters. She hadn't seen me come up behind her and her eyes registered terror and she opened her mouth in a soundless scream.

We played with our dolls and wandered hand in hand about the farm until the clock would strike four-thirty, then Mrs. Trudy would gather her sewing and say, "My, how time flies. It seems we hardly got here. I'll have to hustle."

Ma would thrust a jar into her basket. "Here, try my grape con-

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serve. Come back tomorrow." She would walk to the door and wave until Mrs. Trudy and Mae were specks in the distance.

Standing here at the door as Ma stood, I can imagine their figures in the distance framed by the giant mountain in front of them. I miss Mae, the only real friend I ever had. I wonder if Mother misses Mrs. Trudy. They were contented in each other's company. Ma never speaks of her now. I wonder, as I close the door and return to my duties, if Ma and Mrs. Trudy were drawn to each other because they each had a beautiful child with a crippled mind. If they were, it cost them dear. Mrs. Trudy hasn't been back since the day Arnie died and Mae lay mangled in the hay like my china-headed doll.

I didn't have my doll long.

I remember the day Pa came riding up in the wagon, flushed and laughing. We had spotted him driving up the trail and were standing in the yard waiting, Mama and Arnie and me. Pa climbed down from the wagon with a shoebox in his hand.

"Where's my birthday girl?" he shouted, although he could see me plain as day. He bowed low at the waist, like we'd seen those actors do at the medicine shows, and swept the shoebox into my arms.

I tore open the box with trembling hands. There, in a bed of excelsior, lay my beautiful doll with her eyes closed, her blue bonnet tied under her chin with a real satin ribbon, her blue-rayon dress with its bits of lace shimmering in the sunlight.

Ma said, "You'll spoil the child. We don't have money to throw away on expensive dolls."

Pa grinned. "Now, Ma, our little girl deserves something special for her seventh birthday."

Arnie was rummaging through everything in the bed of the wagon, tossing groceries and sacks of feed about. "Pa, where's the rifle I asked you to bring me?" he yelled.

Pa whirled around, all the laughter gone from his face and voice. "Start hustling your Ma's grub to the house, boy. I've told you a dozen times—no firearms until you learn to control your temper."

Arnie threw a sack of flour over his shoulder and headed for the house, but the look he gave me as he passed would have scorched a toad.

I stayed close to Ma and played with Mae and my new doll for the next few weeks.

One day Pa took me with him 'sing hunting. It was wonderful to be all alone with him up on the mountain. We'd spot a tall walnut tree and make our way around laurel thickets to see if the red-

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berried ginsing was growing near. Pa had his ax along to dig out the roots to sell to the 'sing man. It was hot and close near the laurel thickets, but I didn't care. I'd kick back the dry leaves to search for the tiny flat blades of lion's tongue. When Pa brought me down and left me so he could store his roots of 'sing in the shed, I ran to show Ma the wee plant I'd pulled up for her.

As I eased the door open to surprise her, I glimpsed Arnie leaning over her with a bunch of hearts-a-bursting in his hand. I closed the door quietly, hoping it wouldn't squeak and give me away, dropped my lion's tongue by the steps, and ran to the barn. There in the hay I found my beautiful Mae doll, her body torn, sawdust spilling in the hay, her lovely head broken to bits. Only her blue eyes stared up at me. I flung myself flat in the hay and cried. My cat, Fluffy, who was alive then, came and licked my hand.

I wish I could forget about Arnie, and Mae, and Mrs. Trudy.

Now I bustle about the room, filling the old teapot with boiling water from the kettle, letting the mint leaves steep while I pass out the napkins and syrup cookies and cupcakes.

Mrs. Ida smiles at me when I hand her a steaming cup of tea. "Aren't you proud of Elsie now?" she asks.

Ma nods absently, never taking her eyes off Arnie's picture. "I suppose so. I miss my boy, though."

Mrs. Ida and the other ladies inspect the room with their eyes. They search to see that I haven't missed a cobweb, that the dishes and glasses are sparkling on the shelf, the floor yellow from lye scrubbing.

Back when I was little and they saw Mama wasn't going to come out of the trance she'd fallen into when Arnie died, the neighbors took turns cleaning and cooking and washing. From the beginning, they trained me, too, teaching me all the things I'd need to know to run the house and take care of Ma and Pa. Now they're proud of me. They don't know there's something wrong inside of me, too. Although I can cook and iron and sew, I'm just as full of bitterness as my Mae doll was full of sawdust, only it's sewn up so tight inside of me no one would ever guess. I never speak of Arnie. They think I was too young to remember.

When I began to fill out, Mrs. Ida took me out to the barn and explained to me about boys and girls. She said she was sure that someday I would fall in love and want to marry, and I needed to know these things.

I'll never marry. Arnie saw to that.

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One day when I was hunting hen nests in the barn, Arnie slipped up on me. He tore my clothes and my body. I screamed and Pa came running. Pa never believed in whipping his children. I had never seen him strike either of us. But that day he tore the buggy whip off the wall and gave Arnie a thrashing.

"Don't you ever lay a hand on your sister again," he warned.

So Arnie killed my cat to get even.

From then on, Pa kept Arnie and me apart. That's how I happened to be with him the next time Mrs. Trudy and Mae came visiting. Pa had to go to town and I went with him. I sat up on the wagon seat beside him, hugging my corn-cob doll and chattering like a bluejay. Sometimes I wonder if Pa hadn't been so good to me and if Ma hadn't petted Arnie, would things have turned out differently? I don't know.

I stood with my nose touching the cool glass of the candy counter while Pa talked to the high sheriff about a horse Pa had for sale. The sheriff spit a stream of tobacco into the tracked-in sand on the floor of the store and stirred it up with the toe of his high-top shoes. "Reckon I'll ride out with you and test him out," he said, pulling a red bandana handkerchif out of his hip pocket and wiping his mouth. "I'll be at the wagon when you're ready. Just give me time to lock up the office." And he waddled across the street to the courthouse.

Pa bought me the penny peppermint stick I'd finally chosen and loaded me and the horse feed he'd come after in the bed of the wagon.

Sheriff Bates hoisted himself into the wagon beside Pa. He lay a gun in easy reach beside him. "I brought my rifle along in case I see a rabbit or two to help out on supper."

Pa clicked the reins and started the horses moving. "I ain't never seen you very far from that rifle."

I fell asleep to the drone of their voices, the clop of the horses, the squeak of the wagon wheels. The bags of horse feed made a good bed although the smell of the sweet feed tickled my nose and made me sneeze.

I lay half awake in the wagon, in the doorway of the barn, while Pa and Sheriff Bates each slung a bag of feed on his shoulder. Pa dropped his first.

"Oh, my Lord. Don't let her see."

I saw. Poor Mae lay cut and mangled in the hay where I'd found my doll, only spilled on the hay was blood, not sawdust. They didn't have to examine her to know she was dead. Her throat was slit.

Pa backed the horses out and Sheriff Bates jumped into the wagon as the horses cleared the barn. "There he goes—follow him!" He

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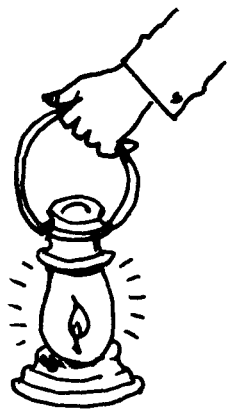
grabbed his rifle and pointed to a figure running through the field. I still don't know whether either of them realized then that it was Arnie who had run out into that field, knife in his hand, his clothes bloody.

As we rounded the corner of the barn, the women came running out of the house. The rest was a jumble in my mind. I can still hear Mrs. Trudy's scream go higher and higher. On sleepless nights, I can see Arnie running in the field of asters, goldenrod, and soft, lacy, lavender joe-pye weed.

Sheriff Bates stood in the wagon, aimed his rifle at the running figure, and shot. It was the kindest thing to do for all of us—Ma and Pa, Mrs. Trudy, me. And even Arnie. He fell in the joe-pye weed, a single goldenrod in his hand.

The ladies are leaving now, bidding us both goodbye until next Thursday. Soon Ma will shuffle back to her rocker and sit and stare at the knotholes in the rough board walls.



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"What," Cindy asked bitingly, "do you have against success?"

"Nothing," Bessie told her. "Since I don't yet have it defined."

"But it's so simple," her daughter-in-law said. "It's merely having money . . ."

THE BEST REVENGE

by ERNEST SAVAGE

Looking out her second-story bedroom window at John Atkins in his yard next door, Bessie Williams sighed self-consciously, a stagy sort of sigh that made her smile at herself. He's such a nice man, she thought. And, Lord, how things do grow for him. A green thumb, a kind heart.

In fifteen minutes, her son and daughter-in-law would pick her up and take her downtown for another luncheon date—and she wasn't ready. She was seldom ready for what had become a tense, awkward family ritual, usually once a month but this time only ten days since the last one. Why so soon? She had not been told.

Oh, she was dressed, all right—in fact *overdressed,* too carefully gotten up in the flowery voile, too clinically washed, coiffed, shined, and polished. Why did she feel so defensive with her son and his soignée wife?

Cindy was her name, a name voguishly laid on millions of girls thirty-five years ago when she'd been born. And voguish was the word for her, so smart in her couture clothes, so avant-garde. "So nouveau riche," Bessie said aloud. Her eyes stung with unsheddable tears. That was the trouble—or part of it, anyway. Paul was not nouveau riche—not yet, not quite—he just lusted to be. Yes, lusted, an obsessional drive.

She no longer understood her son. She had never understood his wife.

Atkins was weeding through the knee-high corn that ran in five tidy rows along the concrete-block wall that separated his place (the old Chapman place) from the new shopping center east of it. Bessie

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watched him from the window fondly. After the thirteen months he'd lived next door, they were, she felt, friends—as neighbors used to be once upon a time.

He was a tall, spare man, still lithe at sixty-eight or -nine, his time- and sun-narrowed blue eyes still quick and full of light, even though he was, she thought, somewhat laconic of speech. Her late husband had been a talker, the air around her head in those long-gone days full of babble. She did not miss that.

Now Atkins straightened from his work, turned, and looked directly at her from sixty feet away. Could he actually see her? Had he sensed her watching him? Bessie's cheeks warmed, but she raised a palm, saw him nod acknowledgment and turn back to his work. They had not yet spoken this morning. Cindy's call arranging the luncheon date had come at 8:30 and had ruined the rest of the morning, as it would no doubt ruin the entire day. Bessie studied her close-clipped nails—a gardener's hand once again, calloused, etched with the stains of soil. Ten days ago her son had taken that hand, palped its roughness, and said, "Mother, this is ridiculous. At your age, working that giant back yard of yours like a dirt farmer. What are you and that man going to do—set up a vegetable stand at the curb? Father would—"

He hadn't finished the thought, but turned loose his mother's hand as a somehow loathsome thing. That was symbolic, Bessie understood, of their nearly total estrangement. My son has divorced me, she thought. Incompatibility. There was pain in the thought.

A forty-year-old deodar, a towering ballerina of a tree, shaded this corner of the house from the morning and midday sun. The east-facing windows of the room were open, allowing in the tag-end of a breeze from the distant mountains, still sweet after its long journey and touched with the scent of pine. She stood in its draft, willing herself to stay calm, to stay dry. The old high-ceilinged room hadn't been painted in years, she noted for the hundredth time, and needed it badly, but Paul had demanded that she not sink another dime into the place.

She herself had planted that deodar and its mate that shaded the other side of the house. Whippy little one-gallon saplings forty years ago. She had painted this room a dozen times—why should she not once again? She enjoyed that kind of work. She had strength and health left—years left. Her long widowhood seemed to be fading away. All those hundreds of books she'd read quietly in the corner. All those useless words she'd learned. Like arriviste. Her son, the

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arriviste. But no, not quite. The word implied ill-gotten gains and as far as she knew Paul was an honest man. He was certainly a hard-working man, the dollar the stern master of them all. Ruthless, though. Especially with her.

The long rectangular center of John Atkins' yard was planted to grass, now rich and thick and solidly green, no motheaten patches as in her still-unkempt lawn. Across the back of his lot he had planted, a year ago, a half dozen dwarf apple trees, Jonathans, Pippins, Golden Delicious. They were in blossom now and would bear fruit this season. Imagine, a tenant doing such a thing! But there they were, burgeoning, making some kind of statement. Sugar peas were already topping the long wire-mesh fence between his yard and hers—you could eat them raw, pod and all.

"All right, Mother," Paul had demanded to know a couple of months ago, "when did he put that gate in the fence? There was *never* a gate in that fence, even when the Chapmans lived there."

"He put it in when he *fixed* the fence, Paul. Nobody had offered to fix the fence since your father died, as you well know."

"Did you ask him to? Or was it his own pushy idea?"

"I asked him to." That was not true, but she could no longer stand her son's growing arrogance, his abusive assumptions.

"And now he's all over your place, too, for God's sake."

"Darling," Cindy said softly, fork delicately poised over her plate of scampi, "he's *helping* Mother, that's all."

"To do what? Make some last-ditch gesture of defiance? He knows the Chapman place is doomed, and he knows Mother's is, too."

"He didn't know the Chapman place was doomed when he moved in," Bessie said. "They didn't tell him. He—"

"Well, he does now, Mother. He's living there from month to month."

"And I don't know that my place is doomed, Paul."

"Oh, for God's sake!"

It was an ongoing argument that had long ago wearied Bessie. It predated John Atkins' arrival next door, and his blithe—crazy?—faith in a future there had merely heated it up. "It's *not* doomed," she said grimly, "as long as I stay there. It's not doomed if I take care of it."

"Stay there and do what? Grow carrots and corn while the house tumbles down around you?"

"It's not going to tumble down, Paul. In fact, I'm going to paint the whole thing this summer, inside and out."

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Paul closed his eyes and winced. "No! Not another dime in that place, Mother! Not a dime!"

"They are my dimes," Bessie said, "and it is my place."

But you cannot sustain a rebellion against your only child. He was her future, after all, carrying his father's blood as well as hers forward into time. She couldn't simply act on her own, follow her own wavering, unsure desires.

And he might be right. Maybe there was a touch of senile obstinacy in her growing determination to stay where she was and not go to that place, Golden Acres, where he wanted her to spend the rest of her life. He'd taken her there last year—"just a visit, Mom, just to test the water"—and it was indeed a lovely place. Clean rooms, your own bath with all those shiny rods to hoist yourself up, and push-buttons to call for help, and game rooms and TV sets everywhere. *And a tall chain-link fence surrounding it all.* "For your protection, Mother, not to keep you in. You could leave any time you want."

Leave for where? She would have no home to go home to.

Driving back to town after that one and only visit to Golden Acres, Paul's leased Mercedes seemed to share the anger of his frustration with her, its low Germanic purr a humming threat. She said wistfully, "I'll bet the house I was born in—I mean literally born in, Paul, in the upper front bedroom—I'll bet it's still there, still full of life, the big oaks still shading the front yard. I'll bet all the other houses on that street are still there, too."

"Mother, this is California."

Yes. Where a forty-year-old house is automatically obsolescent, giving way to a shopping center, a condominium, a freeway, a slum. Where good old neighborhoods vanish before your eyes. Where people build homes in the newly chopped-up hills surrounding town and watch them disappear in next winter's mudslides. *Her* house was on good, solid flat land—a proper house in a proper place, even if the Chapman place next door and hers were the only two left on the block.

"Progress, Mother," Paul had amplified. "This is a world in transition—upward mobility, new techniques, new materials, better houses. It can't be stopped. The old must give way to the new." Ah, yes. The last two or three years had all run together, the luncheon dates a tangle of fruitless disputation, Paul's few unscheduled visits home bitter struggles for control of—of what? *Of her life,* that's what! Of her house, which was her life—her hearth, her place in the world.

The breeze, the pine scent were no longer there, could no longer

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be invoked. She sighed and felt the voile cling to her back. She would, damn it, paint this room tomorrow, then the whole house, in and out. She would continue to tend her languished garden, calloused hands or not, with John Atkins' help or not.

The Mercedes horn sounded out in the street and she felt suddenly unsure again.

Paul and Cindy always picked her up for these disastrous luncheons together, but today Cindy was alone in the car. Bessie got in beside her and said a bit sharply, "Where's Paul?"

Cindy smiled and tooled smoothly out into the flow of traffic. "He's at a meeting," she said. "A very important meeting, Mother."

Bessie closed her eyes briefly. The appellation "Mother" from this girl's carefully designed mouth had always jarred some deep sensibility in her heart. It had been gratuitous from the first, from the moment the ring had been slipped on her finger. Never a by-your-leave. Never "May I call you Mother?" It nagged then and it nagged now.

Between them on the lush front seat of the car was a white business-size envelope. Cindy, glancing at it, said, "Mother, Paul would like you to read that."

"What is it?"

"Well, a kind of—statement."

Bessie took it and held it in her lap as the car hummed down the street. Her first car, hers and Emery's, had been a 1931 Ford Model A convertible coupe with a rumbleseat in back. She smiled, recalling. How much had it cost? $799.00? Something like that. What a joy it had been to save for it, to walk proudly into the showroom with the cash and tell the man they wanted it.

"What does the statement say?"

Cindy made a move into the left-hand lane for an upcoming turn. They were well into town now, Paul and Cindy's tall condo building visible off to the right. They lived high up in the air. Bessie had been there only a few times and she closed her eyes again briefly, remembering: a sterile sort of place, it seemed to her, with not one stick of furniture from home to give it a link, continuity. Bessie had offered.

"Well," Cindy said, deft at the wheel as they made the turn, "it's what they call a Power of Attorney. What it means, Mother, is that—"

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"I know what a Power of Attorney is, *Daughter,* and what it means."

Paul was not yet at their reserved table when the two women sat down facing one another. Cindy ordered white wine for them both. When it came, she leaned forward, elbows on the table, glass cradled in her hands, and said, "The people in this room run this town, Mother." She paused thoughtfully. "Or would you prefer that I call you Bessie from now on?"

"Yes, I would." The women were eye to eye, traditional pretenses cast aside. Cindy's manner was less girlish now, more direct and mature, her voice a register lower. Bessie liked her the better for it.

"From where have they run it," Bessie said, "and to where do they plan to run it?"

"Out of the past," Cindy answered crisply, "and into the future." She lit a cigarette, which Bessie had seldom seen her do before. Bessie was taking note of many things today. Most of the men in the room, for instance, seemed fat to her, and most of the women thin—and ten years too young for the men. She said so.

Cindy smiled and blew smoke. "Are you familiar, by any chance, with the work of the English social caricaturist, Cruikshank?"

Bessie sipped wine. "You mean George Cruikshank? Or his father, Isaac?"

"I had in mind," Cindy said, suddenly cold-eyed, "George. In his depiction of restaurant life in London a hundred and more years ago, the men were always as solid as bears and their women as frail as wrens. The point is, Bessie, that successful men *look* successful. What," she added bitingly, "do you have against success?"

"Nothing," Bessie told her. "Since I don't yet have it defined."

"But it's so simple. It's merely having money."

Paul appeared just then in the broad, oak-framed door of the sumptuous eating room. He spoke to the maitre de and was pointed in their direction. Bessie thought, as he wove his way toward them, that he was not yet a Cruikshank man, that he had a way to go yet. He didn't quite have the air, even though he *could* lose ten or fifteen pounds. She'd not noted that before. This was an eye-opening day.

Smiling, Paul sat down, arranged his napkin in his lap, and said to his wife, not his mother, "Did she sign it?"

Cindy, also considerably refashioned today, snapped, "No! Why

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don't you ask *her,* for God's sake?" So now there was new tension at the table along with the established old.

But Paul had come from a good meeting, wheels greased and turning. He carried excitement with him. "Listen," he said to them both, "it's a shoo-in. I—*we,* rather, Mom and I—have got the key piece of land. They've got—"

"It's not land," Bessie said. "It's a house and garden."

"And they've got," her son finished, "the money."

"And *we've* got," Cindy said, "an obdurate old woman on our hands. Paul, she didn't even read it! It's still in the car." She finished her wine and flashed a signal for more. "And all because of that jailbird, that murderer."

"That what?" Bessie said.

"Mother," Paul said quickly, "I've just met with some men who can make you—ah, moderately rich. Something like three hundred thousand dollars." He couldn't help grinning. "You and Pop couldn't have known how much that land would be worth one day." He paused, musing, his smile warm and nostalgic. "Or maybe you did. Maybe you're as smart as I've always thought you were, both of you."

He leaned heavily against the table. "How would you like to take a Caribbean cruise this year? Every year if you want."

"I wouldn't," Bessie said. "A friend of mine did that. She came home and cried for a week. Love boats!"

Paul usually had a martini before these luncheons of theirs. He'd ordered one as he came in, a double, and when it arrived he lowered it by half. The thing is, Bessie understood finally, these two were fake people in her company. Perhaps all the young were fake when they were with their family elders, patiently waiting, holding back with false smiles, pushing when they could. Perhaps we are all written off as helpless pensioners when we arrive at a certain age, which she had long since passed. My enemy, the young, she thought, and quickly erased the thought as unworthy. She knew her son loved her and had her best interests at heart. But had he ever asked *her* what her best interests were? Did even she know what they were? Was she just now getting a glimmering of an idea?

"Well, then," Paul said, exasperated, "what *would* you like to do? To have happen?"

Bessie smiled. "I would like peace to happen, an end to the bombs. No more children than Mother Earth can nourish. A cure for arthritis."

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"You've got arthritis?" said Paul.

"No. But this friend of mine does." John. With a knobby left-hand forefinger and little lumps on the knuckles of his right. He occasionally grimaced as he worked the soil. He'd never discussed this with her, she'd just noticed. About now he would be irrigating that baby grove of his.

"Mother," Paul was saying, "you've got to admit that house is just too big for you."

"I admit no such thing. In fact, I'm just beginning to realize the potential of the place. Since your father died, I've let it go—and myself, too. But now—"

"That man," Cindy nearly snarled.

"What man?" Bessie said.

"That murderer!"

"What murderer? You said that before. What murderer?"

"Your pal Arkins," Paul said grimly.

"Arkins? You mean Atkins—Mister Atkins."

"Okay, Mother, *Mister* Atkins. Twenty years ago he killed his wife. He spent eighteen years in jail for it. He got out less than two years ago. He—"

Paul came to a halt. He didn't like the look in his mother's eye. Timing, damn it. He'd meant to explode his bomb a little later, a little more gently. He was angry with his wife for taking the initiative, but forced to go on. "He drowned her, Mother. They were in a rowboat on a lake, fishing. He claimed it was an accident, but it wasn't. There was a witness."

Bessie had lost color, but sat stiffly in her chair. She got enough breath together to say, "I don't believe that."

"It's true," Paul insisted. He reached his hand across the table, but Bessie recoiled from it. "We were worried about you and him. We knew nothing about him, except that he seemed to be moving in on you somehow. Mom, look, you're precious to us, the most precious thing in—"

Bessie groaned and pushed to her feet. She couldn't take her eyes away from Paul, who rose to his feet, alarmed. "You," Bessie said, "had the gall to—"

"Mother, we *had* to and I'm glad we did. We have a full report on him. There's no mistake. He killed his wife." He began to circle the table toward her, but she backed away. Color had returned to her face, too much of it. Her eyes were ablaze. She turned and walked out, clutching her purse . . .

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She was two dollars and forty cents short of the cab fare when she got home. Calm as a frozen pond now, she asked the driver to wait, got out of the cab, and walked up to Edward and Henriette Chapman's old front door and rang the bell. Good names, she thought, Henriette and Edward. She missed them. John Atkins opened the door after the second ring. She said, "John, I need to borrow three dollars," and Atkins, glancing over her shoulder at the cab, disappeared at once and returned with three one dollar bills.

He watched her as she went to the cab, paid off the driver, and came back up his walk. At the door she said, "I want a drink," and he turned and led her to the kitchen. He'd been eating lunch—there were a bowl of soup, crackers, a coffee cup, and an open book on the table. He took a pint of brandy from a cupboard, poured some into a clean glass, and handed it to her. She grimaced as it coursed hotly down her throat and sat down at the table. His kitchen was neat as a pin, neater than hers. Neat as a prison cell.

He said, "More?" and she shook her head no. He put the bottle back in the cupboard and sat down facing her. The upper inch of his forehead was white, the rest of his face farmer-brown. He was clean-shaven, as always, his work shirt and jeans fresh that morning. An ironing board was permanently set up in a corner of the kitchen.

She said, "I know nothing about you."

"That's not true, Bessie."

"I know nothing *important* about you, then."

"That's not true, either."

She closed her eyes for a moment, heat still in her throat and belly. He was right, she did know important things about him. "I watch you sometimes, John. From my window."

"I know."

"I'm not spying."

He nodded. "I know."

"Sometimes you stand in the middle of your yard and gaze at the mountains for minutes at a time."

He said nothing.

"But you never go there. You never go anywhere. That truck of yours hardly ever leaves the garage."

He still said nothing. He was a man waiting, good at it. He looked out his window now, at those mountains.

"Emery and I used to go there often," Bessie said. "Especially after Paul grew up. We went fishing. Sometimes in the rivers, sometimes

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in the lakes. But mostly the lakes in the later years. The rivers were too fast and rough, dangerous."

He looked back at her, his blue eyes intense. "The lakes can be dangerous, too, Bessie. But you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know that."

"They told you."

"Yes. A while ago."

"And you came home by yourself."

"Yes. I didn't believe them."

"But now you do."

Bessie looked squarely at him. "Are you telling me that you killed her?"

"No. I didn't kill her. She drowned. I tried to save her, but—" He shrugged.

"There was a witness, Paul said."

"Yes there was—her daughter. Jane's daughter, Tracy."

"Not *your* daughter?"

"No—hers. We'd been married only a couple of years."

He fell silent and Bessie said, "Are you going to tell me about it?"

He looked at his hands on the table, turned them over and looked at the palms. "In prison," he said, "I learned how to grow things. I'd never raised so much as a radish before, but in prison I got to be pretty good. The last three years I was in charge of the truck farm. It saved my life, Bess, saved my mind."

"If you weren't guilty," she said, "it must have been hell." She studied him, his eyes still downcast. She desperately wanted him to prove to her that it hadn't been murder, but something else—an accident, an act of God, anything else.

"What I've done," he said, "is pretty much put it out of my mind."

"Please, John, tell me about it, tell me the truth."

"Why is it so important to you? What difference can it make?" His eyes widened.

"Yes, it can make all the difference. You know how well we've gotten on. I have plans for the house—to fix it up, to take care of it again."

"Why, Bessie? What's the point to that?"

"I want to *live* there. I want to make it a home again, and I don't want to do it alone. I *can't* do it alone."

"We've been close," John said. "I've been aware of that. But I didn't dream—"

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"Why didn't you? Because of your prison record?" She felt the brandy in her blood, felt an opening up, a dropping of old restraints.

"Bessie—" Atkins shook his head. "The jury found me guilty—I couldn't convince them I wasn't. How can I convince you?"

"You can try."

Atkins ran gnarled fingers through his hair and said, "It was the daughter—Tracy. She was nineteen. She hated me, resented the marriage from the first. We were fishing, the three of us, on that lake. It was cold. We were all wearing heavy clothes—boots." He was staring down, in the grip of recall. "Jane was a drinker—hell, I was too then. She had money, which is what Tracy thought I married her for, but that wasn't the reason. We got along, Jane and I."

"Did you love her?"

He returned Bessie's steady gaze for a moment. "As much as need be. We got along, that was the thing. Except for the girl. She was a terrible girl, a really terrible girl, promiscuous, greedy, a liar. Anyway, Jane got a big hit on her line that day—bent the pole double. She had this pint of whiskey in her other hand and it fell into the lake. She tried to retrieve it and fell in herself—sank like a rock without making a sound. I went in after her—pure reflex—and damn near went down myself with all that heavy stuff on. I floundered around for a while and then reached for the boat, but Tracy hit me with an oar. She was a savage, she wanted me dead. I got a hand on the gunwale and she began to hit it with the oar, trying to break me loose. She *wanted* her mother to drown, Bess, and she wanted me to drown. Then somehow I got myself in the boat and subdued her—no easy task—and rowed back to shore, about a hundred yards or so.

"People were on the dock. They'd seen some of what happened. Tracy told them I'd killed her mother and then tried to kill her. She was crying, a pitiful sight. She cuddled herself into the arms of this big guy who turned out to be a deputy sheriff. He arrested me then and there."

Bessie said, "Did Tracy know him?"

"You mean was it prearranged? No. But she was a pretty girl, Bess. Beautiful, I suppose. Dark hair, icy blue eyes, creamy complexion. Any man—" He shook his head again. "And she was just as effective at the trial. She knew just when to cry, and how much. How to use her eyes, cross her legs. It was no contest." His eyes met

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hers, held them a moment, and then looked out the window at the distant hills again.

Bessie said softly, "John, do you have arthritis?"

He looked back at her sharply. "Arthritis? No. Why?"

She reached across the table and took his left hand, bent forward to peer closely at the lumpy knuckles, saw they were wound scars and nothing else. She dropped his hand and he withdrew it into his lap, frowning at her.

"Not guilty," she said.

That afternoon they drove to Reno and were married. The next day they returned home and moved John's few things into Bessie's house. Bessie was full of energy and plans. She'd never felt better in her life. Together they spent a week redoing the yard and garden, tearing out the tired old fruit trees and planting new, fixing the fence along the other side of the spacious lot, installing a sprinkler system.

One day over lunch, she said, "John, how come you picked this town to come to?"

He leaned back in his chair, pondered a moment, and laughed. "Because it was as far away from back there as I could get, Bess. It was just plain dumb luck that brought me next door to you." His smile warmed. "What is it they say? Living well is the best revenge? Just pure luck, Bessie—a long time coming."

They spent the next ten days painting the house, inside and out. When that was done, she took him by the hand and led him across the street, where they looked back at the place, Bessie squinting to narrow her focus on just the house, isolating it from the view of either side. Except for the soaring trees, it looked to her as it had forty-five years ago when she and Emery were young. Her grip tightened on John's hand. "Reno," she said abruptly, "wasn't a honeymoon. I want a honeymoon."

"Good," John said. "Where? Hawaii?"

"Lord, no. I want to go camping in the mountains. I want the cool of that pine-scented air. I want to float in a boat on a lake again. I want to catch fish."

John dropped her hand and faced her. "You're sure, Bess?"

"I'm sure, John. Our old camping and fishing gear is stored in the basement. Let's go sort it out."

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a *NEW* short story by

IAN STUART

Recently the French authorities had taken a tougher line with the Basque Nationalists who had crossed the border to escape the Spanish police, and a dozen of them had been deported. The same fate was likely to befall Garcia at any time. Before it did, he wanted his side of the story to be published by the British press . . .

THE APPROACH OF WINTER

by IAN STUART

It was autumn when I came to St. Valéry along the winding road from Tardets. Too early yet for the peaks to be capped with white, but the summer was over and already the leaves of the silver birches were turning yellow. Another few weeks and the snows would come, blocking the passes through the mountains.

This was Basque country, and many of the signs were in Basque as well as French. The town's full name, St. Valéry-les-Montagnes, seemed on the grand side for a place with a population of 400 and little visible means of support. Beyond it, the Pic de Ver loomed over the shuttered hotels with their faded paint and *à vendre* boards, over the new Office de Tourisme, and over the casino, which, like most things there, was closed. The *à louer* signs over the apartments looked as if they had been there for years. Like the tourist office, they seemed to be symbols of a forlorn hope rather than a commercial prospect. Maybe I was wrong, and when summer came people would flock to St. Valéry to rent them, but it seemed unlikely. And in the winter the skiers headed for the centers farther east, like Gourette and Font-Romeu.

Still, the gardens down the middle of the main street were bright

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with late flowers, the sun was shining, and the mountains made a magnificent backdrop, appearing in the clear air to rise almost from the end of the street. One or two shops were still open, and halfway along there were tables and chairs on the pavement outside L'Hôtel de Ver. It was already past six and I realized I was hungry.

I had been in too many small French provincial hotels to be discouraged by the bar-cum-reception area at L'Hôtel de Ver, with its vinyl-tiled floor and plastic-topped tables or by the faded menu pinned up outside the door. In the unlikely event that the food and rooms were that bad, I could bear with them for one night and find somewhere else tomorrow.

Then Monique came through the door from the back and I decided they would have to be very bad for me to leave so soon. For Monique was twenty, and very, very pretty. She had gleaming dark hair that swung just clear of her shoulders, big dark eyes which, as I was to learn, could sparkle with mischief or be tragic pools, and a merry mouth. Her figure might not have satisfied a fashion magazine, but it looked perfect to me.

"Bonjour, m'sieur." Her voice had a lilt to it and her smile lit up her face.

I asked if I could have dinner and a room for the night—probably two or three. Both, she told me. *D'accord.*

The room to which she showed me was on the second floor at the front, overlooking the street. When she had gone, I hung my spare pair of trousers in the wardrobe, showered, and put on a clean shirt. Formalities completed, I walked over to the window and looked out.

The westering sun shining on the mountains seemed to bring them to life. Where the sun didn't reach, they were dark and a little menacing. Beyond those mountains, I thought, only a few miles away was the Spanish frontier. In a sense that was why I was here. I felt comfortably relaxed, in a mood to enjoy a good dinner and half a bottle of Madiran, with, perhaps, an armagnac to finish with. Tomorrow I must start work again, but this evening was my own.

Turning away from the window, I went downstairs to the bar. There were no other customers, and no one behind the counter. I waited, and after a minute or two a woman came in. She was in her late twenties, with short dark hair, a rather long face, and a manner that was businesslike rather than friendly. I asked her for a Kronenbourg Special. She poured it, answering my remark about the weather with a monosyllable, took the two coins I gave her, then went out again. I drank my beer and went in to dinner.

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There were only three other people in the dining room and Monique seemed to be the only waitress. They had probably got rid of any staff they employed for the summer season. My French, while not fluent, isn't bad, and she stayed to chat briefly every time she came to my table. I learned that the hotel belonged to her sister Annette and Annette's husband Pierre. Annette was the silent young woman who had served me in the bar.

I explained I was in St. Valéry to collect material for a book and wasn't sure how long I would be staying. That, Monique assured me, was no problem. As I could see, at that time of year they weren't busy.

The hotel didn't have a lounge, so after dinner I had the choice of spending the rest of the evening in the bar, a foreigner alone among the locals, going for a walk, or retreating to my room. It was still fine and warm, and I settled for a walk.

Streetlamps cast pools of light along the deserted pavement, but beyond the top of the town the slopes of the Pic de Ver were lost in darkness. I had a sudden feeling that I was very not lonely but alone. I was used to traveling by myself, and I had been away from home a month this trip, but I had never experienced the sensation as strongly as I did now. Yet only a short distance away lived the man I had come to St. Valéry to meet.

His name was Manuel Garcia. Until a year ago he had been a leader of the extremist Basque Nationalist organization, ETA. Directly or indirectly, he had been involved in scores of terrorist bombings and murders. Now he had renounced violence and was living in St. Valéry as Marcel Grandier—a refugee from the Spanish police, who still wanted him for his old crimes and for the information he could give them.

At first he had been safe enough. Basques might claim to be one people irrespective of the side of the Pyrenees on which they live, but on the French side nobody got very excited about it. All Garcia had to do was keep out of trouble and nobody would bother him. Recently, however, the French authorities had taken a tougher line with ETA men who had crossed the border to escape the Spanish police, and a dozen of them had been deported. The same fate was likely to befall Garcia at any time. Before it did, so the word had come to me, he was willing for us to meet and talk. He wanted his side of the story to be published in the British press. Which was why a London newspaper was financing my trip—I was to write some articles for them as well as my book.

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I had most of the material already. One or two meetings with Garcia and I could go home.

The next morning after breakfast, I walked up the street to the post office and rang the number I had been given. I thought it better to ring from there rather than the hotel, where the only phone was in the passage outside the dining room.

A woman answered. I asked if I could speak to M. Grandier. He was away, she informed me in a voice like shattered ice. She had a Spanish accent and I wondered if she was Garcia's mistress, Isabella Lopez, who had fled with him.

Did she know when he would be back?

"Perhaps tomorrow," she said, and rang off.

I wasn't unduly concerned. It was pleasant here and the paper was being generous about expenses. Another day or two wouldn't matter. On the contrary, it would give me more time to gather background for my novel.

On my way back to my room for my camera and notebook, I met Monique, and on an impulse I asked her if she would come out with me to show me the countryside—it was still quite warm, we could take some food and have a picnic lunch somewhere.

Her eagerness was quite a boost for my ego.

What about her sister? I asked.

That was all right. She had already done most of her morning's tasks. As long as she was back by five o'clock, Annette wouldn't mind. And she would bring the food for our picnic and a bottle of wine.

Looking back now, there seems to have been something idyllic about that day. Perhaps it is because of what happened afterward. We ate our lunch at the edge of the wood overlooking a valley, with the mountains rising on the other side. Monique laughed at some of my French and I at her English. Afterward, we stretched out on the grass, relishing the warmth of the sun as people do when they know that winter is not far away. It was very innocent, and perhaps we enjoyed it the more for that. There was no tension between us.

When we returned to the hotel, Pierre had just come in from a day's shooting. Apparently he had been successful, for he was in good spirits and insisted on standing me a drink before I went up to my room.

But there is more than one sort of winter, and it seemed to me I felt its approach the next morning.

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Breakfast at L'Hôtel de Ver was served in the bar by Annette. "Do you know M. Grandier's house?" I asked her, spreading butter on a second hot croissant.

She was about to pick up the empty glass that had contained my orange juice and stopped, her hand outstretched. She stayed like that for a second or two, then started to relax. But she was still tense.

"M. Grandier?" she repeated.

I could almost feel her considering the possibilities. What could I, an Englishman and a stranger in the district, want with Grandier? She knew where he lived, I was sure of that, but her immediate thought was to deny it. Why?

Whatever the reason, her reaction had told me something: she knew Grandier's real identity—or, if she didn't, something else about him.

In the end, she decided that there was nothing to be gained by pretending she couldn't tell me. Grandier, she said, lived a kilometer outside the village along the road to Olerons. It was a big old house, quite isolated. She couldn't resist asking, "You know him, m'sieur?"

"No," I answered. "I've never seen him. Somebody mentioned his name, that's all."

She relaxed a little more. "He's a bad man. Nobody in the village likes him."

"Oh?" I said.

But clearly she believed she had told me quite enough already. She picked up the glass and went out of the bar without another word.

I got on with my breakfast. Once or twice I saw her eyeing me uncertainly, and when I came down from my room twenty minutes later I found her talking to her husband in the passage. From the way they stopped abruptly when I appeared I knew they had been discussing me. They said nothing in response to my murmured greeting, but I felt their eyes following me as I went out to my car.

This time when I telephoned from the post office, the woman with the Spanish accent told me that M. Grandier had returned and would see me at 10:30.

I found the house without difficulty. The road to Olerons climbed along the side of a valley with flowers in the meadows and wide views of the mountains to the south. Then it plunged into a wood of spruce and birch, and a winding drive led off to the left. The house

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was virtually surrounded by trees on three sides, while behind it the mountainside rose steeply almost from the back wall.

I drove through a crumbling stone arch and parked at the end of a terrace. The gravel had almost disappeared, and moss and grass were spreading unchecked. The sound of cowbells, unmusical yet appealing, drifted up from the valley. As I got out of the Renault, a large German police dog chained to a wall got to its feet and barked its dislike. There was nothing personal in it, the dog looked anti-social and probably disapproved of anybody who came to the house, but I gave him a wide berth. Several geese were strutting awkwardly about the terrace. Additional security, I supposed.

At first there was no answer to my ring, and I was about to pull the bell handle again when the door was opened by a blonde woman of about thirty-five. She didn't look like a servant.

"I'm Nicholas Gray," I told her. "I telephoned."

"You can prove who you are?"

I couldn't blame her for being careful, but I had a feeling she didn't like my being there. Taking out my wallet, I showed her my international driver's permit with the photograph of me. That seemed to satisfy her.

"You must leave your camera here," she said.

I hadn't expected Garcia would let me take any shots of him anyway. She watched while I put the camera down on a table, then led the way into a smallish room furnished like a study that looked out between the trees across the valley. A man was sitting in a chair with his back to the window so that his face was in shadow.

"This is the English writer, Gray," the woman told him.

He stood up and regarded me in an appraising sort of way, without offering to shake hands. "Bonjour," he said.

Garcia was short, no more than five feet five or six, and about forty-five, with black hair thinning on the top of his head and receding from his temples. He had a broad nose and a jaw already beginning to need its second shave of the day. It was a hard face, that of a trader rather than an idealist, but commonplace enough. Something about it made me uneasy, though. Perhaps it was my knowledge of his past—or perhaps his eyes, which were as cold as the stony slopes of these mountains in winter. I could understand why Annette had called him a bad man, and why I was suspect when she thought I wanted to meet him.

We talked for over an hour. More accurately, Garcia talked while

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I listened, asking an occasional question and making notes. And how he talked, in his fluent, heavily accented English. It all came down to his realizing a year ago that violence was not only wrong morally, it would achieve nothing. He was, he said, a good Catholic, and the bombings and killings had always troubled him. He had salved his conscience by telling himself the "war" was in a just cause and there was no other way.

"We Basques are an ancient people," he said. "Once all this was the Kingdom of Navarre. Our tongue is the oldest in the world. You knew that, eh?"

I agreed I had heard it.

Then, twelve months ago, the death of a young girl in an ETA bombing had sickened him and he had seen that if they were to realize any of their objectives it could only be by peaceful means.

"Bombs and guns are out of date in such situations," he declared. "You become too successful and the government uses more force. Other governments help it. Small movements have no hope of succeeding in the long run—all they do is lose more and more men, while the people become disillusioned, tired of the struggle.

"Why did you come to France?" I asked. "Couldn't you have done more by staying in Spain?"

"No!" He waved the question aside contemptuously. "You think I should have stayed, yes? The police wanted me. They still hunt me, but here I am amongst my own people—Basques, like me. And the French police are more *sympathetique.*"

"Why do you think you haven't been deported already? Other men have been, and you were a leader."

He shrugged. "They wait their time. Any day now they will come." His eyes mocked me.

He went back to talking about being a good Christian and hating violence. It might be true, I thought, but I didn't like his glib self-justification.

He must have seen as much, because he asked me, "You find it hard to reconcile my ideas with the man I was, eh? They have told you, down there in the village, I am not a good man. Now you do not know whether you can believe me."

"Why don't they like you?" I asked him.

He shrugged again. "They want only to go on living their nice comfortable lives and they are afraid I may change that. They do not care about being Basques, only for their little businesses."

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It was very likely true. After all, wasn't that what most people wanted?

All the same, I was puzzled as I walked back to my car. There was something more, I was convinced. Something I hadn't seen. We had arranged that I should return the next morning. Perhaps then I would learn what it was.

I spent that afternoon exploring more of the countryside. When I got back to the hotel, Monique greeted me warmly and I stayed talking with her until Annette came and told her sharply to see to things in the dining room. Monique made a face and went. Perhaps she did like chatting when she might have been working, but equally Annette seemed to enjoy playing the bossy older sister. And this evening she was clearly on edge. Perhaps she and Pierre had quarreled.

I went up to my room to shower and change. Before going down again, I glanced out of the window. A white Citroen was pulling slowly into the small hotel parking lot. When it was level with Pierre and Annette's car and my Renault, it stopped. The driver got out, took a large suitcase from the back seat, and came into the hotel. From where I was standing I could see only that he was young, dark, and slim. It was silly, I suppose, but I felt mildly resentful—this was my hotel, I didn't want company, and he was an intruder. Slightly out of sorts, I went down to the bar.

Annette was busy dealing with the new arrival, and Pierre came from the kitchen to serve me. Like many French chefs, he was a chubby, amiable-looking man, but this evening he had something on his mind. His tiff with his wife, if there had been one, seemed to have upset them both. As soon as he had poured my Kronenbourg and taken my money, he returned to the kitchen, leaving me alone. I took my time over the beer, then went in to dinner.

There were only two other people in the dining room, an elderly French couple at a table near one of the windows. They were probably locals. At any event, they left almost as soon as they had drunk their coffee and I didn't see them again.

Monique was in good spirits, talking and laughing gaily. Then the driver of the white Citroen came in and sat at a table in the farthest corner. After that I saw less of her. She no longer stayed to chat when she came to my table, and it seemed to me she lingered longer than necessary when she took his order and brought his wine,

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then his appetizer. He talked a good deal in a low voice, and smiled often, showing very white teeth. Monique giggled.

Once Annette came in, saw them talking, and called her sister aside. Monique obeyed, and I heard her voice in the passage, raised in protest.

Now I could see the new arrival more clearly, it struck me there was something vaguely familiar about his lean, dark features. I had a feeling I had seen him before—but almost certainly I was mistaken. His wasn't an unusual type of face in this part of the world.

While I was eating my cheese, Pierre looked in. The elderly couple were just leaving and he gave them a little bow, then nodded to me with a murmured, "M'sieur." The Citroen's driver he ignored. Perhaps the dark young man was a regular visitor.

On my way out, I stopped to look in the register on the reception desk in the bar. Monique had made sure I signed it before she showed me up to my room, but there was no name after mine. The latest arrival hadn't registered.

"You wanted something, M'sieur?"

I turned and saw Annette watching me, her expression blank. "No, I was just having a look," I said, closing the register.

Later, I decided to go for a stroll before bed. I went as far as the top of the street, then back on the other side, without seeing a soul. As I crossed the yard, I heard Monique and her sister arguing in the kitchen. The window was open and I couldn't help hearing what they said.

"Why? What have you got against him?" the girl demanded.

"He's no good," Annette told her.

"How do you know? He only arrived this evening."

"Never mind how, I do."

I don't make a practice of listening to other people's conversations, but I stopped now. My first thought had been that they were discussing me, and I was angered, but when Monique said, "He only arrived this evening" that could only mean the driver of the Citroen.

"You knew him before, didn't you?" Monique demanded.

"No."

"You know something about him." There was no answer, and after a moment Monique went on as if she couldn't believe it, "You're jealous!"

"God, if you only knew!" Annette exclaimed bitterly. "Don't you see, it's you I'm thinking of?"

"Well, you needn't," Monique said. "I'm not a child. If you know

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something, why won't you tell me what it is? He's a friend of Pierre's, isn't he?"

"No!"

"Then why were you quarreling about him this afternoon?"

I went on up to my room, hoping neither of them would look out as I passed. But they were too busy bickering to pay any attention to anything outside the kitchen.

I tried to remember where, if at all, I had seen the mysterious young man before. And as I climbed into bed, the memory came to me. It was ten days before, in a village not far from Bilbao. I was sitting outside a café in the square with a friend, sipping coffee and talking about the purpose of my trip.

"You see that young man?" he asked. He made no sign—to do so might have been dangerous in that place—but I knew who he meant. There was only one young man in sight, a slim, dark fellow in his twenties walking toward us from a shop on the other side of the square. "His name is Carlos Santana. He is one of ETA's deadliest killers. A crack shot. What the Americans call a hit man."

Not sure whether to wholly believe him, I watched the young man get into a car and drive off, apparently unconcerned that he might have been seen by other, more menacing eyes than mine. There was an arrogance about him, I thought. But he probably knew the village and its people.

"What's he doing here?" I inquired.

My companion, a respected journalist on one of the leading Spanish papers, shrugged. "Who knows? If you look in the papers tomorrow, perhaps you will learn."

It was a warm day, but I felt a sudden chill.

Now I asked myself the same question—what was Carlos Santana, ETA hit man, doing here in St. Valéry?—and I felt the same foreboding chill. For I believed I knew. Manuel Garcia was planning a fresh outrage. He must have been thinking about it this morning while he was telling me he was a reformed character who abhorred violence. No wonder there had been a mocking expression in his eyes.

Annette knew who Santana was, if not why he was here, and that in some way Pierre was involved. It was the reason for their quarrel, and why she had been on edge, probably knowing the Spaniard was coming. It was also why she had wanted Monique to have nothing to do with him, but she couldn't explain that without betraying her husband.

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I remembered something else in the last second or two before I fell asleep. It was another thing my Spanish friend had said: "I wouldn't want to be in Manuel Garcia's shoes just now."

I was dressing the next morning when I heard a car drive out of the hotel yard. Looking out of the window, I saw it turn left into the street and accelerate away toward the road junction at the top of the town. Where was Santana going so early? I wondered.

When I entered the bar a few minutes later, there was no one about. When somebody came, it was Monique, looking sulky.

"I'd like orange juice, croissants, and coffee, please," I said. "Where's Annette this morning?"

The girl pouted. "She's gone to the market in St. Jean. She goes every week."

I hardly heard. I was thinking about Santana—and suddenly everything fell into place. I stood up, pushing my chair back so violently it fell over. "I'm going out," I told Monique. "I won't have any breakfast."

There was no time to call the police—I might already be too late. I ran out to the yard, pulling my keys out of my pocket as I went. The first time, in my haste, I made a mess of it, and the engine didn't start. Cursing, I tried again, and this time it fired. I shoved the gear lever into first and drove out of the yard.

Except for a solitary truck farther down the hill, nothing was moving in the street. I turned left, then left again at the top where the signpost pointed to Olerons.

The road started climbing 'round the head of the valley and I could see the trees surrounding Garcia's house high on the slope half a kilometer away. Then it dived into the semidarkness of birch and pine. Somewhere just ahead of me was the start of the drive.

The next moment I saw something which made me brake hard. Parked just off the road under the trees was a car I recognized. I stopped and switched off the Renault's ignition. In the silence I could hear the cowbells down in the valley. Then the quiet was broken by the blast of a gunshot quite close. I got out and started up the drive.

I knew where he would be. A third of the way along, there was a grassy ledge that provided a clear view of the front of the house. It was the only place close enough to give the near certainty of a kill with a single shot that was screened from both the house and

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the road. Santana could wait there in hiding with a high-velocity rifle, for hours if need be, until his target showed himself.

Only something had gone wrong and he was lying on his back, his rifle by his side, staring with unseeing eyes at the cloudless sky. The front of his shirt was a bloody mess.

I looked up and saw Garcia standing on the terrace watching me, a shotgun in his hands. He said nothing, and after a moment he turned, went back indoors, and closed the door.

As I walked back to where I had left my car, I spotted someone moving between the trees some way ahead. I started running, but I was too far behind, and a few seconds later a car door slammed and an engine started farther down the slope.

I drove back to the hotel slowly. There was no point in hurrying any more.

Monique told me Pierre was somewhere about, she didn't know where—probably he had gone to the shops. Annette wouldn't be back from St. Jean until midday or later.

"Would you like your *petit déjeuner* now, m'sieur?" she asked.

I shook my head. I didn't feel like eating.

I don't know why I didn't call the police. Maybe it was less the fear of being involved than that what I had stumbled on seemed like a family feud, and I was an outsider. Perhaps I simply left it to Garcia to tell them. After all, he was on the spot.

But he didn't, and by the time they learned Santana was dead, Garcia and his girl friend had flown and the house was deserted. The police appeared to take surprisingly little interest in the crime. I supposed they knew Santana's record, and assumed Garcia had been warned he was coming for him. I was thankful they didn't also know that I had been within fifty yards when he was shot and saw no reason to question me. If they had, I might have felt bound to tell them about the figure running through the wood and the car I had seen parked under the trees, which was gone when I returned to the Renault.

All along it had puzzled me that Garcia, a leading member of ETA living openly here in St. Valéry, had escaped deportation when so many of his former associates had been shipped back to Spain. At first I had accepted his story that time was running out for him, but why should the authorities wait, allowing him time to flee, before they pounced? And why hadn't he fled?

Last night I had seen the reason. That day in the sunny village

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square, my Spanish friend had said he wouldn't want to be in Garcia's shoes. At the time I thought he was referring to the near-certainty of Garcia's deportation, but he had said it just after Santana got into his car and drove off. As if the two things were somehow connected.

Garcia had known he was hated here, and that it wasn't because his presence endangered the local tranquility. The Basques on this side of the frontier might not be militant, but neither would they look kindly on a man who betrayed his former colleagues in return for his own safety and, very likely, a steady income.

Still less would ETA. Santana had been sent to St. Valéry to execute the traitor, for what he had done and to prevent him betraying any more of their men. The police would know most of that, and assume the rest.

But Santana had been a good two hundred yards from the terrace when he was shot: Garcia would never have used a shot-gun at that range. It might have wounded the assassin, but only superficially, and he would have fired back. I was no expert, but even I could see Santana had been shot at close range. There was no way he would have allowed Garcia to approach him from the front carrying a gun. Only somebody he knew and trusted could have done that.

The car I had seen under the trees was Pierre's—I recognized the number—but it wasn't Pierre who shot Santana, and who I saw running back through the wood toward it, it was Annette. They had only the one car, and she had taken it, ostensibly to go to St. Jean as she did every week. Annette was terrified by her husband's involvement with ETA, and his part, however small, in the plot to murder Garcia. The police would have investigated that crime far more enthusiastically than they did Santana's death.

As I say, I didn't go to the police. After all, I had no proof, and without it they woudn't have believed me. I was thankful for that.

As soon as I could I left St. Valéry. It was cold that morning, with a hint of approaching winter in the air.

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DETECTIVERSE

THE VICAR AND THE LOCKED ROOM

by EDWARD C. McMANUS

Down in Mycroft, Town-of-Hampton, where the lilacs bud and bloom,
There the Vicar, Dr. Critchley, went inside his private room.
Yes, he went into his study, closed and barred the sturdy door,
And was heard from, as Poe's Raven said (poor Vicar!), "Nevermore!"
Well, Detective Sergeant Saunders was soon called upon the scene
By the Sexton, Arthur Perkins, who had dreamed an awful dream.
Arthur said he saw the Vicar with his arms atop his head,
Slumping forward on his writing desk and looking rather dead.
So Detective Sergeant Saunders called some stout lads from the town
And by dint of axe and hatchet smashed the sturdy portal down.
Then they stood there, struck with terror, for with hands atop his head
Sat the Vicar, Dr. Critchley, looking permanently dead.

The body was unmarked, they saw, each hair in its proper place,
Though they did see fit to mention the glazed look upon his face.
The Vicar was a robust man and never had been sick a day—
His death under such circumstances could, they said, have been foul play.
All the windows wore thick shutters of a most secure design
And they searched for points of entry but they couldn't find a sign—
Just a study with a writing desk, a bookcase, and a bed,
And the chair with Dr. Critchley, who was definitely dead.

The walls and roof were English oak and Saunders tapped around,
But the echos were unblemished by a weak or hollow sound.

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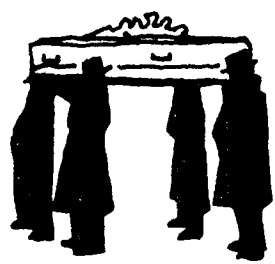
The floor was quarried marble and it made a proper tomb
For departed Vicar Critchley, who had somehow met his doom.
And so Mycroft, Town-of-Hampton, poised to grasp its proper
place
As the scene of locked-room murder and a national disgrace.
Then Widow Piggott, the housekeeper, demanded to be heard
And Detective Sergeant Saunders copied down her every word.

"The Vicar, bless him, used that room to write his Sunday talk—
"He'd go in there each Saturday at seven by the clock.
"On Sunday morning he'd come out and pause to smell the
flowers,
"Then off he'd go to services and preach for several hours.
"He'd rave at that, he'd rant at this, he wasn't very good,
"And no one paid him any mind, and no one understood.
"They'd itch and twitch and fidget and just look out at the sun,
"And pray a private prayer or two that Vicar would get done.
"Last night he wrote a little talk which made him very proud,
" ' "T'so good,' says he, 'that just this once I'll practice it out loud.'
"So, you see, it wasn't murder when the man drew his last
breath—
"He just read his homily aloud, and bored himself to death."



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a *NEW* Jeffery Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The cruise down the Rhine had been the fulfillment of a long-time promise. The spa at Baden-Baden was their final destination, with one glorious week given to relaxing in the sun, bathing in the famed mineral water, enjoying the races, the concerts, and even the Casino, said to be Europe's oldest gambling establishment.

Leila was changing for dinner when Rand told her he was going to phone Karl Maehl's room. "Whatever for?" she said. "The man's a total stranger to you."

"I just want to make certain he recovered his clothes from the bathhouse," said Rand . . .

THE SPY AT THE SPA

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Karl Maehl stood at the roulette table in the ornate Red Salon of the casino at Baden-Baden, fingering a stack of white chips as he watched the spinning wheel slow to a stop. "Black seventeen," the head croupier announced in German, raking in the losing bets and paying off the winners.

Maehl's eyes drifted up to the face of a gorgeous young woman across the table from him. He had noticed her at the Iffezheim racecourse that afternoon and he knew that her name was Greta Franz. It was too bad, he thought, that his stay at Baden-Baden was of necessity such a brief one.

"Place your bets," the head croupier called out. He was a grim-faced man who wore tinted glasses and a perfectly fitting black

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tuxedo. His eyes seemed to miss nothing as Karl Maehl slid his stack of white chips onto one of the numbers nearest him, red twenty-one.

As the wheel spun, Karl glanced again at the face of Greta Franz. He caught her eye and smiled, but she looked away. Such a lovely young woman. Perhaps he might—

"Red twenty-one," the croupier announced.

Maehl watched the stack of gold chips and a few oval gold markers join his pile. He glanced at his watch and scooped up his winnings, tipping the croupier with a single gold chip as he walked away from the table. He left the Red Salon almost at once, moving through the evening crowd to the cashier's window. His winnings for the night totaled nearly a hundred thousand German marks. In the morning he would check out of the luxurious Brenner's Park-Hotel and travel less than ten miles to the French border. It was as simple as that.

He retired early and dreamed of Greta Franz. When he awakened in the morning, shortly after seven, he knew he'd have time for a final visit to the Friedrichsbad near the center of town. It was an imposing Renaissance-style structure with a great green dome, more than a century old but still preferable to the ultra-modern Augustabad. Though his hotel advertised its own clinic and pool, Maehl preferred the warming waters of the elaborate bathhouses. There was something about the circular marble bath beneath that great dome that made him feel all too briefly like an ancient emperor enjoying the luxuries of his kingdom.

Now, having removed his clothes in the dressing room and walking to the elaborately decorated pools, he marveled again at the tile walls with their paintings of herons and other shore birds. There was much he would miss about West Germany, but perhaps nothing so much as the splendor of Baden-Baden.

In the clear warm water of the circular pool, he saw only a solitary swimmer, his face obscured by the ripples of the surface. Karl sat for a moment on the steps of the pool, feeling the water warming his calves and thighs.

Finally he descended all the way, standing on the floor of the pool until only his chest and head were above the water. The swimmer, gliding just beneath the surface, seemed to circle closer like a shark picking up the scent.

Then, with a startling suddenness of movement, the other's face broke through the water in front of Maehl. It was the grim-faced croupier from the Red Salon. "Red twenty-one," he said and plunged a dagger into Maehl's heart . . .

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For Rand and his wife Leila the cruise down the Rhine had been the fulfillment of a long-time promise. They had carefully planned the journey two summers ago, only to cancel it when Leila was asked to teach a special summer course in archaeology at the University of Reading. The spa at Baden-Baden was their final destination, with one glorious week given over to relaxing in the sun, bathing in the famed mineral water, enjoying the races, the concerts, and even the Casino, said to be Europe's oldest gambling establishment.

On the first evening of their stay, as Rand and Leila were seated on white folding chairs in the garden of the colonnaded Kurhaus awaiting the start of the evening's concert, they were approached by a slender, middle-aged man named Conrad Eiser. "Your first visit to Baden-Baden?" he asked after introducing himself.

"Yes," Leila responded. "We've been here only a day and I'm enchanted already. It's everything I dreamed it would be."

Rand added, "We took the Rhine cruise and then came here. My wife's been wanting to do it for years."

It was growing dark and behind them the lights of the colonnade were turned on. Conrad Eiser lit a cigar and said, "I come here every summer. There's noplace like it in Europe. And the August race meeting is the high point of the season. Kings and queens, opera stars, industrialists: one sees them all at Iffezheim racecourse. Victor Hugo and Ivan Turgenev came here frequently more than a century ago."

"That woman must certainly be a film star," Leila observed, indicating a strikingly beautiful brunette who moved down the aisle of lawn chairs on the arm of a white-haired man.

"Her name is Greta Franz," Eiser informed them, "and she could well be a film star. Perhaps she once was. But now she is the new wife of Helmut Franz, the pharmaceutical giant. That's he with her. They always go to the Casino after the concerts. It's over there on the right, next to the colonnade."

"We'll be going there ourselves," Rand said. "Any tips?"

Eiser thought about it. "Unless you're in the mood for high-stakes gambling, I'd suggest you avoid the roulette tables in the Red Salon. The minimum bets are quite large. But you have eight other rooms and some thirty-five tables to choose from."

"Thanks," Leila said. "We'll remember that."

On the outdoor stage, a string quartet was tuning up. They settled back for a program of Mozart. When the concert ended, Rand and Leila were surprised to see that Conrad Eiser had departed. They

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followed the crowd, including Helmut Franz and his young wife, in the direction of the Casino.

It was everything they'd heard—ornate and even opulent—with streams of bejeweled gamblers and gaping sightseers moving through the nine rooms with a flow that seemed choreographed.

"It's lovely," Leila conceded, "but somehow I expected it to be more decadent, with spies hiding behind the potted palms and slinky ladies in tight sequined dresses."

"I'm probably the closest thing to a spy here, and I've been retired nearly ten years."

"There's Greta Franz again, coming out of the Red Salon. She certainly is a lovely woman."

"Not my type," Rand said, not altogether truthfully.

They played blackjack, and Leila won a few times, then they tried baccarat, a game neither of them knew well, and they were lucky to come out even for the night.

"Shall we have breakfast at Konig's Coffeehouse?" Leila suggested when they returned to their room at Brenner's.

"That's fine with me, but first I'd like to try out that bath we saw today at the Friedrichsbad. Want to come along?"

"You know I don't function well early in the morning, darling. Go without me and I'll meet you at the Coffeehouse at nine."

"This whole trip is worth it just to hear you call me darling," Rand said. She wrinkled her nose at him.

In the morning Rand rose early and made his way across town to the bathhouse. Baden-Baden was a city of nearly fifty thousand people, yet in the early morning hours there was hardly anyone about. When he reached the Friedrichsbad and entered it, he thought for a time he was their only customer. Disrobing in the changing room, he noticed a set of men's garments hanging in an open locker. One other person was here, at least. He padded barefoot across the damp tiles to the archway separating two large pools of warm mineral water. In the older of the two rooms, beyond the circular pool, he glimpsed a movement. It appeared that someone was being carried out.

"What's the trouble here?" Rand asked a white-coated attendant who appeared around a corner.

The man seemed startled to see him. "Nothing, sir. A little illness." He turned and retreated the way he had come.

The pool was empty when Rand reached it, though he noticed a

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reddish smear along one side of the surrounding steps. Had the ill person fallen and cut himself, or hit his head?

The warming water felt good on his legs, but Rand couldn't relax. Had the attendant been on his way to retrieve the ill or injured man's clothes from the locker? If so, why had the sudden sight of Rand made him change his plans? He left the pool quickly and returned to the changing room. The clothing was still there and Rand went rapidly through the pockets, searching for some identification. A wallet with a small number of German marks contained no identification, although he noticed it had been manufactured in East Germany. That fact in itself meant little, since there was a flourishing trade between the two countries. He had better luck in the jacket pocket, where he came across a check-in slip from Brenner's Park-Hotel similar to the one given him upon their arrival.

Karl Maehl, it read. *Room 339.*

Rand pocketed the slip and returned the clothes to the locker.

Leila was waiting at the Coffeehouse and as they enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of fancy German pastry Rand told her about the mysteriously vanished Mr. Maehl. "Perhaps I should report it to the police," he said.

"We're here on vacation," she reminded him. "The poor man no doubt slipped in the pool and hit his head."

"Maybe I'll check at the hotel when we get back."

"Just remember you don't work for Double-C or British Intelligence any more. These past six months have been the happiest I've known, Jeffery, partly because you haven't heard from Hastings."

"Don't worry. I'll just ask for Karl Maehl and see what happens."

But they told him at the hotel desk that Maehl had checked out that morning. "He's gone," the room clerk said. "You must have just missed him."

"That's all right," Rand said. "It wasn't important." As an afterthought he asked, "Do you know Mr. Maehl?"

"I can't place him, but the computer shows he's a frequent guest here."

Rand thanked him and rejoined Leila. Whatever had happened at the bathhouse that morning, it hadn't prevented Karl Maehl's departure.

They spent the afternoon at the races and by evening he had virtually forgotten about Karl Maehl. The next day was filled with activity, including a visit to the Trinkhalle, a majestic building

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nearly a century and a half old housing a series of fourteen frescoes depicting local legends. It was there that they fell into a conversation with Helmut and Greta Franz over glasses of mineral water.

"Some year you should come here in September," Greta told them. "They serve fresh grape juice during the harvest season in addition to the mineral water. I find it preferable."

Her husband scoffed. "My wife believes in natural foods as the way to health. A part of my pharmaceutical business comes from the sale of vitamins and food supplements, but she won't hear of it." Despite his words, his face was filled with love for his young wife.

"We noticed you at the Casino the other night," Leila said. "How was your luck?"

"Helmut doesn't play to win," his wife informed them. "He plays to be seen. Sometimes I think he married me so more people would notice him at my side."

The remark was a bit narcissistic and cruel, but her husband seemed not to mind. He smiled and took another glass of mineral water.

When they returned to the hotel that evening, Rand picked up their room key at the front desk. The clerk recognized him and said, "Mr. Maehl has returned, sir. I believe you were asking after him yesterday morning."

"Maehl?" He'd almost forgotten. "He's back so soon?"

"I mentioned he stays here frequently, though generally not this frequently."

"Does he have the same room?"

"No, he's in five-eleven."

"Thank you."

Leila was changing for dinner when Rand told her he was going to phone Karl Maehl's room. "Whatever for?" she said. "The man's a total stranger to you."

"I just want to make certain he recovered his clothes from the bathhouse." He phoned Room 511, but there was no answer.

They were on the fifth floor, too, and later, on the way to the elevator, Rand said, "Wait here. I think that's Maehl going into five-eleven."

"Jeffery! This is foolish."

Rand smiled at her. "I like it better when you call me darling." He hurried down the corridor to the room where a man barely five feet tall was inserting a key into the lock. "Pardon me, sir. Are you Karl Maehl?"

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The German turned to stare at him with tiny eyes. "I am. Do I know you?" He spoke English poorly.

"Not really, sir. But I was at the Friedrichsbad yesterday morning and I found your clothing hanging in a locker there. I thought I saw you being carried out. I hope you weren't injured."

The man hesitated before answering, as if groping for the correct English words. Finally he said, "You are mistaken, surely. I only arrived today."

"Oh? Don't you come here often?"

"This is my first time."

"Then pardon me for my error, Mr. Maehl."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jeffery Rand. I'm retired from Her Majesty's Service."

"Excuse me, please. I believe I hear my telephone ringing." Maehl entered his room and closed the door.

Rand shrugged and went back to join Leila at the elevator. He hadn't heard the phone ringing, but it was obvious the man wanted nothing to do with him.

"Satisfied now?" Leila asked.

"Not really. That man is barely five feet tall. Those weren't his clothes I saw in the bathhouse locker."

It was Conrad Eiser, the man who had befriended them on their arrival, who seemed to offer Rand a possible solution to the mystery. He was chatting with the hotel's concierge as they emerged from the elevator, and he recognized them at once. "Going out to dinner?"

"Yes, we are," Leila told him. "I didn't know we were staying at the same hotel."

"I always stop at Brenner's. There's really noplace else that's any good."

"Funny thing," Rand said. "I met a man named Karl Maehl the other day. Perhaps you know him."

"Not the name. I may know him by sight."

"That's just it. Now another man with the same name has checked into the hotel."

"Well, that's not too unusual. Karl Maehl is not a common name, but it's not uncommon, either. I knew someone with that name when I was at school." He paused by a mirrored wall to adjust the black tie on his formal attire. "Will you be gambling again this evening?"

"I doubt it," Leila responded. "We were to the races yesterday and

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may go again tomorrow. I think that's enough gambling for us. But you must have a big date tonight."

The German beamed. "Dinner with a charming young woman. I hope your own evening is as enjoyable."

They left him and went on their way. "Maybe he's right," Leila suggested. "Two people with the same name could be nothing more than a coincidence."

"The room clerk told me Maehl was a frequent guest, yet he didn't know him by sight. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"There's probably a good explanation. I wish you'd forget this and relax," she told him.

They dined at an expensive inn near the racecourse, lingered over after-dinner drinks, and returned to the hotel around eleven.

"Someone from London has been trying to reach you," the clerk told Rand. "He wouldn't leave his name, but said he would try again."

They puzzled about it on the way up in the elevator. Neither had any relatives who might be ill and it was doubtful the University would be trying to reach Leila. "What about Hastings?" she asked.

"He doesn't know we're away. You know I haven't spoken with him in months."

Yet when the call came again at eleven-thirty, he wasn't surprised to hear the familiar voice of Hastings at the other end of the line. "Sorry to bother you on your holiday, Rand."

"That's all right. How did you find me?"

"One of our people recognized your name. We have a bit of a problem at Baden-Baden."

"I suspected as much. With a man named Karl Maehl?"

"Exactly."

"And you want me to help."

"No, Rand. I want you to do nothing at all. You're on the verge of mucking up a carefully planned operation. Do you understand?"

"Of course. Hands off. But hands off what, specifically?"

"Stay away from Karl Maehl."

After Rand hung up, he sat discussing the situation with Leila until after midnight. "I was right in suspecting that something was going on."

"And you'll be right in obeying Hastings' instructions to stay away from it."

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"He must have a man on the scene who told him I spoke with Karl Maehl."

"Maybe. Unless Maehl himself passed along the word."

"I'm just wondering if Hastings knows what's really going on."

"Do you?"

"No," he admitted, "but I know I saw Maehl being carried out of that bathhouse. A different Maehl."

"Perhaps he was spirited away by British Intelligence, which has now substituted a double."

"A double who looks nothing like the real Maehl, who's a much smaller man? Hastings wouldn't do anything as foolish as that."

Finally they went to bed, but Rand slept restlessly, haunted by images from the past. He realized he'd been out of the business for too long to expect a full disclosure from Hastings, yet it pained him to be ordered off something without knowing any details. He didn't feel he could delve too deeply into the situation with Hastings, especially after Hastings had made clear he didn't want to discuss it, but if something was wrong, perhaps Rand would be justified in going against his wishes.

The following morning over breakfast, Leila glanced up from the English-language newspaper she was reading. "The Rhine is flooding again, south of here. They've had to mark the German-French boundary line with white paint on the trunks of trees. Near Strasbourg they recovered the nude body of a man from the water. He hasn't been identified yet."

Rand grunted, only half listening. Then he came alert. "Do you have that map in your purse?" She found and handed it over and he unfolded it, studying the distances involved. Five or six miles from the spa to the river, and the bridge to France. Perhaps another forty miles downstream to Strasbourg. The nakedness of the mineral baths, the nude body in the river. There could be a connection.

"I must drive to Strasbourg," he decided.

"What in heaven's name for?"

"To see that body."

"You think it's the first Karl Maehl, from the baths? But you never saw him. Be reasonable."

"I'm going," he decided. "Want to come along?"

"No!" He could see she was prepared to sulk. As he said goodbye and promised to return as soon as possible, she called after him, "Remember to take your passport—you'll have to cross the border twice . . ."

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The fortress city of Strasbourg, near the junction of the Ill and Rhine Rivers, was a marvel to Rand, with its magnificent Catholic cathedral dominating the skyline as it had for nearly a thousand years. He knew he must bring Leila here and berated himself for not insisting she accompany him. But he had no time for the cathedral—his destination was the city's morgue.

When he was finally allowed to speak with someone in authority, a grey-haired official named Leteu, he presented himself as the brother of a missing man and asked if he could view the body that had been found in the river for possible identification.

"It has been bloated and battered," the Frenchman warned. "Not a pretty sight."

"How long was he in the water?"

"About two days, perhaps less. Swept down from the north, we imagine."

"He was found in the Rhine, not the Ill?"

"Correct."

"Were you able to determine the cause of death?"

Leteu looked uncomfortable. "First let me show you the body."

He had been right about it not being a pleasant sight. Rand determined that it was generally the height he'd expected from the clothing in the locker, but any actual identification would be difficult.

"Sorry," he said. "It is not my brother."

"You're the second to ask to see the body this morning."

"Who was the first?"

"A man drove down from the spa at Baden-Baden. His name was Helmut Franz. He couldn't make an identification, either."

"You said you'd tell me the cause of death."

"He was stabbed through the heart. The knife wound was thin and it closed up in the water. We almost missed it."

"You mentioned Baden-Baden. Would the time in the water be consistent with the body having been thrown in near there?"

Leteu thought. "I would say so, yes. Of course, the ways of a river near flood stage are difficult to predict with any accuracy."

"Thank you," Rand said. "I'm sorry I couldn't help with the identification."

Back at the hotel, Rand requested to see the manager. He was shown into an office behind the registration desk where an efficient

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young man was working at a computer. "I'm the assistant manager. Perhaps I can help you. It's not a complaint, I trust."

"Not at all." Rand gave him a quick glimpse of a government identification card he'd carried during his working days in London. "I'm making some confidential inquiries on behalf of the British Embassy at Bonn. I understand a man named Karl Maehl is a frequent guest here."

The young man, whose nameplate read Dedrich Schwin, tapped some buttons on the computer. "Frequently, yes. Twice this week, in fact."

"Do you know Mr. Maehl?"

"No, not personally." Schwin shifted uneasily in his chair. "You must realize there's a limit to the type of information I can release about our guests."

"Certainly. Could you tell me who places his reservations?"

"They're placed by long-distance telephone from Bonn. The billing is to a firm there—Reyco Engineering."

"I see." Rand saw quite a bit. Reyco Engineering had been a cover for British Intelligence a decade ago and no doubt still served that purpose.

"Does that help you?"

"I think so. One final question. Are Helmut Franz and his wife frequent guests here, too?"

"Oh, yes."

"What room are they in?"

Schwin punched up the computer and ran through an alphabetized list of the guests. "Donavin, Douville, Edwards, Field, Franz . . . They're in three-thirteen. That's one of our larger suites."

"Thank you."

Rand used the house phone in the lobby to call Room 313. It was Greta Franz who answered. "My husband is away," she told Rand. "Perhaps I can help."

"Do you expect him back soon?"

"It's difficult to say. He was called away on urgent business."

"I'll try again later."

Rand went back to his own room but Leila was also out. He went in search of her and found her relaxing at the hotel pool, wearing a peach-colored swimsuit he especially liked. "Well," she greeted him, lifting her sunglasses. "The traveler returns."

"Strasbourg looks interesting. We really should go there to see the cathedral, if nothing else."

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"Did you find anything, or was it a wild-goose chase?"

He told her about his visit to the morgue. "It could have been the man I glimpsed being carried from the Friedrichsbad."

"Or it could have been someone else."

"One thing is certain—Karl Maehl holds the key to it. And there he is now, across the pool."

"Hastings warned you to stay away from him."

"I don't think Hastings knows the former Karl Maehl ended up in the Rhine." Rand strolled casually around the edge of the pool and sat down on a reclining deckchair next to the little man.

"Mr. Rand, isn't it?" Maehl greeted him. "I'm very good at remembering names."

"I spoke to you about finding your clothes in the bathhouse locker."

"And seeing me carried out. Yes, I remember. You were mistaken, of course."

"Mr. Maehl, I'll be very frank. I believe there was an earlier guest here using your name. Furthermore, I believe he was stabbed to death in the bathhouse two days ago. His nude body was recovered from the Rhine."

The little man's face grew pale. "How do I know I can trust you?" he asked in his difficult accent.

Rand decided to take a chance. "I used to work for a man named Hastings. I still handle special assignments for him. In fact, I spoke to him on the phone just last night."

"Ah—Hastings!"

"Perhaps you told him you met me."

"No, I haven't spoken with Hastings."

"Why are you in Baden-Baden, Mr. Maehl?"

"It is—" He frowned, groping for the words. "It is a stop on the route. I am going west."

"From behind the Iron Curtain," Rand guessed. Why did you come to Baden-Baden? Why not continue across the bridge into France?"

"For the money. At the casino."

Rand gazed out across the pool to where Leila sat in her peach bat' ng suit. "They paid you for defecting. You gambled—"

.t roulette."

'—and won the agreed-upon amount. How much?"

"Last night nearly fifty thousand German marks. Tonight I'm promised an equal amount. The croupier signals me when I should ' t red twenty-one. That is the winning number."

"It eliminates embarrassing bank records," Rand admitted. "I

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wonder how many agents and defectors they're paying off with casino winnings these days."

"You say the other Karl Maehl was murdered?"

"The one before you, and maybe others before him. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Have you bathed at the Friedrichsbad yet?"

"No. I am told I should, before I leave tomorrow."

"Who told you that?"

"The croupier mentioned it last night at the roulette table."

"Follow his advice, by all means," Rand said. "I'll see you again." He got up and strolled back to where Leila waited.

That night they returned to the Casino, but Rand was careful to steer Leila away from the room where Karl Maehl gambled. "We don't want to spoil it," he explained.

"Do you know what you're doing, Jeffery?"

"I think so. Defectors, crossing to France from the east, stopping here to collect one installment of their payment for fleeing to the west. It's much safer for our government than putting them on a diplomatic flight out of Bonn or Berlin. All using the same name because that makes the hotel reservations and travel papers easier to arrange. Only there's a bad link in the chain. Someone is killing them for their money. A hundred thousand marks. That's about thirty thousand pounds, thirty-five thousand dollars. And with two in one week it's quite profitable."

"Is that little man's life in danger?"

"I think so."

"Did you tell him?"

"He'll find out soon enough."

When they returned to their room a little before midnight, Rand tensed as the door swung open. "We didn't leave that light on," he whispered to Leila.

Then a voice came from inside. "Come in, Rand, and shut the door. What in hell have you been up to here?"

It was Hastings, all the way from London.

Karl Maehl stood at the roulette table in the ornate Red Salon, waiting for a signal from the grim-faced croupier. The time was just before midnight, and he had been playing the table for nearly an hour. At last came the almost imperceptible motion for which he'd

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been waiting. The little man pushed his pile of chips onto red twenty-one and watched the spinning ball make contact with the wheel.

"Red twenty-one," the croupier announced and pushed his winnings toward him.

Karl Maehl placed one more bet, won a few chips on black, and then went directly to the cashier. Then, with the money safely in his pocket, he left the casino.

In the morning, he packed his bags and had them taken down to the hotel lobby. He was anxious to depart, but remembered the croupier's urging that he must visit the Friedrichsbad. He could walk there from the hotel.

When he reached it, the hour was still early. There was hardly anyone in the big domed bathhouse as he stripped off his clothes and padded across the tile floor to the large circular pool in the older section of the building. He paused to admire the ornate tiles with finely painted birds, then walked down the steps of the pool to feel the warm mineral waters envelop him.

There was one other swimmer just below the water's surface. At first Maehl saw only the naked body—it wasn't until the man's head broke through the surface that he recognized the grim-faced croupier from the Red Salon.

"What are you—?"

"Red twenty-one," the croupier said and Maehl saw the dagger raised before his chest. He thought he cried out, but he couldn't be certain because suddenly the pool area was filled with running men. One of them, the Englishman Rand, dove from the steps and landed almost on top of the croupier, wrestling the knife from his grasp. Then he turned to one of the other men and said, a note of triumph in his voice, "Here's your murderer, Hastings—the Casino croupier, Mr. Conrad Eiser."

There was a large audience back in Rand's hotel room as he explained. In addition to Leila and Hastings, an inspector from the local police, and Karl Maehl, Helmut Franz and his wife Greta were both there.

Hastings explained that part of it to Rand. "Helmut has been invaluable in the past. As you discovered, Baden-Baden serves as a way station on our defectors' route across Europe. When he is here, he checks to make sure things are running smoothly. He reported your presence, and your conversations with the second Mr. Maehl here. When my telephone warning did no good discouraging you, I

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flew out here myself. Helmut also traced the body of the earlier Maehl downriver to Strasbourg, as you did yourself. But how did you know about Maehl?"

Rand was enjoying the drama of it, feeling a bit as he did in the old days when he lectured the code-breakers at Double-C. "As soon as I learned about the multiple Maehls, and about that body in the river, I put it together with the brief glimpse of a body I'd gotten at the bathhouse the other morning. It seemed obvious to me that someone had killed Maehl for the money you had paid him under the guise of roulette winnings. Our second Mr. Maehl told me the croupier urged him to sample the waters at the Friedrichsbad before he departed, and I suspected another robbery and disappearance was on the way."

"But that man Eiser," Leila said.

"Eiser—exactly. He must have recognized my name or otherwise suspected me, because he sought us out on two occasions, posing as a guest at the hotel. But yesterday in the assistant manager's office, I asked for Helmut Franz's room number. The assistant manager, Schwin, ran through the alphabetized guest list on his computer through the D's and E's and F's to Franz and there was no Eiser where there should have been. If Eiser wasn't a guest as he claimed, what was he? We ran into him last evening in black tie and evening clothes. He said he had a dinner date, but I suspected something else. They weren't dinner clothes—they were his working uniform. The Casino croupiers and their assistants all wear formal attire and I remembered that Eiser had warned us away from the Casino's Red Salon on the pretext that the limits were too high. In truth he didn't want us to recognize him at work."

"So you set a trap for him at the bathhouse this morning," Hastings said.

"With your help. I understand the police have also arrested an accomplice who helped him carry out the body—the attendant I ran into just after the earlier killing."

Hastings glanced at Helmut Franz. "The Baden-Baden connection is ended. No more trusting so much to crooked croupiers. I should have known that if he'd fix a roulette wheel to arrange our surreptitious payoffs, he might do almost anything. He acted with the approval and knowledge of the Casino management, of course. That's why he couldn't simply arrange for a confederate to win extra money. British Intelligence was paying out the money these defectors won. When Conrad Eiser decided he wanted it for himself, he had to kill

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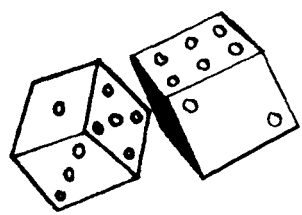
them to get it. He chose a time when several men in a row were traveling the underground route, hoping to score several times before we realized back in London that the men were disappearing."

The current Karl Maehl looked relieved. "I can continue on my route now?"

"As soon as we recover your luggage from Eiser's accomplice. He took it, of course, in the event you'd hidden the money there rather than in your clothes." Hastings stood up. "I'll be accompanying you across the French border personally. Then we'll fly you the rest of the way to a safe house in Scotland."

"And we'll be continuing our holiday," Leila said. "I think even you must be ready for a rest now, Jeffery."

"What I'm ready for," Rand replied, "is some of that warm mineral water. I believe I wrenched a muscle diving into the pool."



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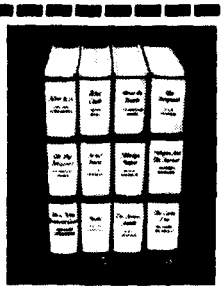

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"Q"

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Found out that cheating's unlucky.
He welshed on a bet
And to his regret
Now lies under the blue grass of Kentucky.

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"Q"

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Found his young wife's shoulder got colder;
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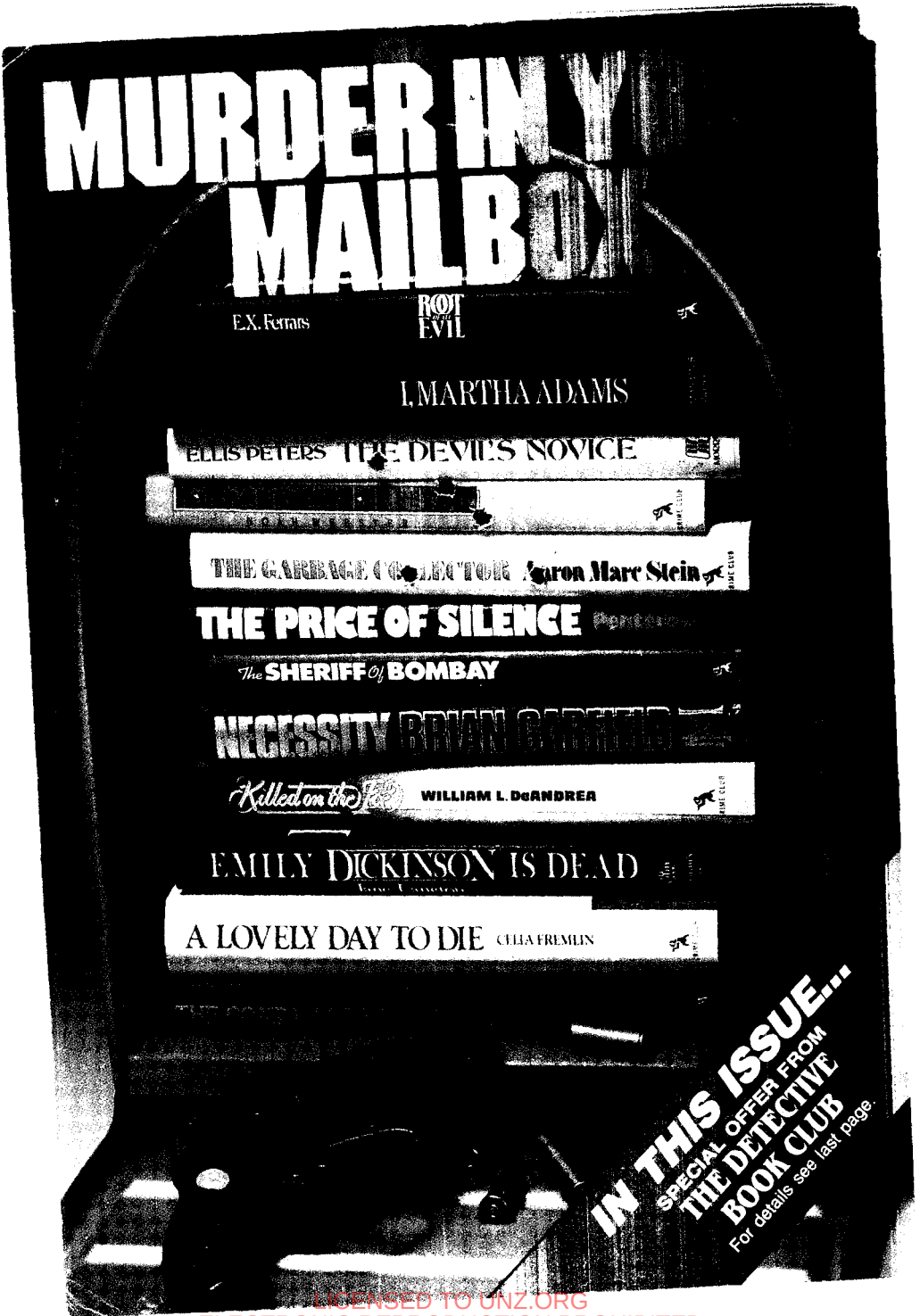
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